

VIDEOGAME CULTURE
AUGUST 2005
EDGE
NINTENDO | SONY | MICROSOFT | PC | PORTABL
LOOK INSIDE THE FUTURE
Exposed: how next-generation hardware will redefine gaming
'MOVIE-QUALITY GRAPHICS'
Visuals to die for – and what developers will actually be using them to create
THE NEW SPEC WARS
How PS3 and Xbox 360 match up when it comes to processing power
PLAYSTATION 3
SONY
XBOX 360
PREVIEWED BLACK & WHITE 2 OKAMI SERIOUS SAM 2 THE MOVIES MARIO KART DS PATH OF NEO CHIBI R
REVIEWED KILLER 7 BATTLEFIELD 2 GUILD WARS FIRE EMBLEM ADVENT RISING BATMAN BEGINS CONKER





In producing this month's issue we spoke to a number of game developers about the arrival of next-generation hardware and how the competing platforms will measure up. Here's Lionhead big cheese **Peter Molyneux** on PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360: "I think titles will look very similar on the two machines – and probably the difference is going to be more about what else your machine can do; how easily you can get online, how many games are produced that are online enabled, how simple it is to use the console, the way the controllers are designed. Just being two or three times more powerful isn't the issue these days. Consumers don't even know what's under the lid any more – it's not 64, 128, 256bit, it's some Cell thing, it's no longer understandable."

He has a point, of course: the gaming experience is about more than what's happening onscreen (hell, Microsoft is betting the farm on it). But the precise graphical capabilities of each new piece of hardware cannot be swept aside as irrelevances, because graphics are now such a big part of electronic entertainment. We're no longer simply interested in the way primitive collections of dots react when they collide – one of the reasons we're driven to play games like *Half-Life 2* or *Resident Evil 4* is because we want to see what's coming next: the graphical content is reward in itself. So, gameplay's more important than graphics? No, gameplay *is* graphics – at least in significant part.

That's why this month we investigate the truth behind all the talk that has surrounded PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 since they first crossed paths at E3 (see p8 and p50).

We know that wanting the hardware capable of making the prettiest pictures is in some ways a vacuous enterprise, but with graphical innovation being all we're likely to get from the first wave of next-generation titles, it's best to be packing the most capable hardware for the job.



EDGE

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"Hey, this looks better than anything you own. You know, in two months' time, everybody's gonna be wearing the pirate look. Aye!"





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CONTENTS

AUGUST 2005

This month











Every month



CONTENTS
CONTINUED

Hype





Review







START



Illustration: **Matthew Dartford**

HARDWARE

Consoles square up as next-gen war ignites

With the starting gun of E3's launch presentations still ringing in their ears, the war of words between Sony and Microsoft continues to heat up

In any other industry, the accusation and counter-abuse generated in the post-E3 ether would have CEOs banging together the heads of their underlings to restore order. But, as this is the videogame industry, representatives of Microsoft and Sony have continued their vicious sniping across the lines (and that's to say nothing of the re-ignition of the eternal ATI vs Nvidia deathmatch). Indeed, the whole sorry affair of whether Xbox 360 or PlayStation 3 boasts the more impressive technical specifications is rapidly becoming something of an awkward issue, considering the silicon powering each box isn't yet finished, let alone there being any completed devkits or consoles rolling off the production lines.

Perhaps the most fitting analysis comes from one senior UK developer (who, for obvious reasons, preferred to remain anonymous) who archly commented: "Just believe the hype. Both consoles are obviously better and higher definition than each other. Why would Sony or Microsoft lie?"

And it's at this level that the most damage is being done, as the deep rivalry between all companies concerned is tempting spokespeople who should know better to commit sins of omission (at best) and enter the realms of subterfuge (at worst).

Microsoft, in particular, has found itself on the defensive thanks to Sony's cleverly massaged E3 'wow' offensive. One peculiar outcome, considering Microsoft's usually by-the-book approach to PR, has been an abdication of responsibility for its corporate message, which to a large extent has been replaced by the blog of Xbox Live's program manager, Larry Hryb, better known by his pseudonym Major Nelson.

Originally catching the media's attention during E3 when, stung by Sony's presentation, graphs purporting to demonstrate Xbox 360's technical superiority to PlayStation 3 were published, the stakes were further raised when Hryb posted video and audio feeds of a detailed interview with two members of Microsoft's Advanced Technology Group. Queried by us, Marie-Clair Suter, a UK press officer for Xbox, said Nelson shouldn't be taken as an official Microsoft spokesman, merely a company enthusiast.

Of course, it's not only Microsoft which has been caught out by over-enthusiasm. The now-notorious PlayStation 3 demos have caused Sony equal problems, we've learned that one of the companies involved in producing 'game-spec' footage was Blackpool-based CG specialist RealtimeUK. With a strong reputation for vehicle-based game cut-scenes, having most recently worked on Eutechnyx's *Street Racing Syndicate*

In the words of one senior UK developer: "Just believe the hype. Both consoles are obviously better and higher definition than each other. Why would Sony or Microsoft lie?"

Next-gen claim investigated: 1. 'PlayStation 3 is twice as powerful as Xbox 360'

Based on Sony's performance data which rates PlayStation 3's total processing power at two teraflops (two trillion operations per second) in comparison to Xbox 360's one teraflop, Andy Beveridge of SN Systems argues such headline figures are suspect. "Normally when people talk about flops they are referring to CPU performance, but in this case both companies have decided to include their graphics chip spec in the total," he says.

Hence, most of raw performance included in these teraflop totals comes from the consoles' graphics parts, not their CPUs. Sony's own figures rate Cell at 218 gigaflops with Xbox 360's CPU rated at around 115 gigaflops, and this seems to be the one area most people agree that Sony has an advantage.

"While PlayStation 3 is something like 1.8 times more powerful in terms of pure floating point CPU power, this isn't as important as Sony would have you believe," reckons ATI's Richard Huddy. "In terms of total bandwidth the Xbox 360 has roughly six times as much power (278 vs 48Gb per second), while in terms of shader power the Xbox 360 is 1.07 times as powerful."

Combining these two metrics, which Huddy says better describe the working performance of consoles running game code, Microsoft's claim is that its Xbox 360 outclasses PlayStation 3 by almost a factor of two.

The truth is it's impossible to judge until both consoles are actually released, and even then a performance advantage of two (either way) won't be significant enough to get a badly developed PlayStation 3 game looking better than a well-developed Xbox 360 game (or vice versa).



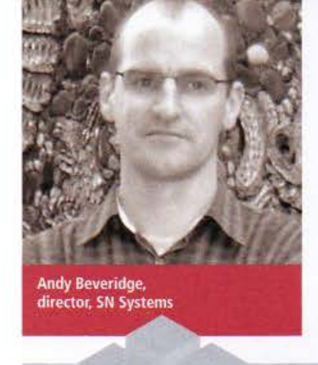
***Killzone 2* on PS3. Or at least how the game will look once it's finished. Or at least how it is *supposed* to look once it's finished. One thing's for sure: PS3 launch titles won't look this good**



Next-gen claim investigated: 2. 'PlayStation 3 will be harder to develop for than Xbox 360'

One of Microsoft's favourite Sony-baiting sticks in the PlayStation 2 era, the ease-of-development argument, actually encapsulates the different philosophy of the two companies when it comes to some of the wider issues of console design.

With its experience in hardware design and production, Sony has always controlled and manufactured as much of its hardware as possible. In this respect, choosing Nvidia as a partner for PlayStation 3's graphics chip marks something of a sea change for the company. In comparison, as a software company Microsoft focuses on elements such as its XNA Studio game development environment and Xbox Live service while outsourcing as much of its consoles' hardware design and manufacturing processes as possible. The result is Sony tends to design its PlayStations to be as easy and economic as possible to manufacture, even at the expense of coming up with architectures that aren't optimal for content creators. Microsoft takes the opposite view, making Xbox easier to develop games for but at the cost of optimising the physical design. This means it hasn't been able to create a smaller Xbox in the ways Sony has created its PSone and PStwo. Equally, Sony is able to drive down the cost of manufacturing its consoles much more rapidly, while Microsoft, at least in the case of Xbox, has continued to lose money on every hardware unit it's ever sold. So in this respect the soundbite is correct, albeit with the caveat that Microsoft will lose more money per Xbox 360 it sells than Sony will per PlayStation 3.



Andy Beveridge, director, SN Systems

Next-gen claim investigated:
3. 'Xbox 360's unified memory means it will be superior to PlayStation 3'

Another key Microsoft comparison point is how the memory for the two consoles works. Both have 512Mb of DDR3 RAM, but it is structured in different ways. In PlayStation 3, it is split into two, with 256Mb of memory for Cell and 256Mb of memory for the RSX graphics chip, although the RSX can also render into the entire 512Mb if required. In contrast, all the Xbox 360's memory is shared between the CPU and GPU and can be divided up however the developer requires. In addition, the 360's GPU has 10Mb of very fast EDRAM which ATI, in echoes of Sony's Emotion Engine label, calls 'intelligent' memory.

In this respect, Microsoft's system appears to be more flexible. However, as SN Systems' Beveridge points out, when you consider just the CPU level, and in particular the specific components that make up the Cell CPU, each of these so-called synergetic processing units also has its own memory. "Since these different parts can all access their own memory at full speed simultaneously it should give the PlayStation 3 a significant performance advantage if you can program to take advantage of this," he muses. "Just how big an advantage this really is remains to be seen, and will be down to good tools and clever programming by the game and middleware developers."

game, it's believed RealtimeUK worked on the demo for off-road racer *Motor Storm*. Neither Sony nor the studio itself were prepared to reveal details of jobs undertaken, although RealtimeUK MD Tony Prosser did confirm the company was working with Sony.

The issue arises because, based on its previous working methods, it seems likely RealtimeUK would have authored all assets in-house rather than using those produced by *Motor Storm*'s developer Evolution. If this was the case, it would make description of the footage as a 'game demo' an extreme exercise in being economical with the truth.

Something forgotten in the melée, however, is that in some respects Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 are more similar than different. Both follow the current philosophy of CPU designers dropping traditional single-chip designs for complex multicore, multithreaded solutions. Both connect highly programmable graphics processors with the ability to handle dozens of complex shader calculations per cycle to their CPUs using extremely high bandwidth connections. Both systems have 512Mb of memory, support floating-point calculations throughout their pipeline and can output at at least 1,080 interlaced resolution.

From this point of view, the question of which console is most powerful becomes less relevant. Certainly, at this stage in proceedings, the performance gap between the two seems likely to

Next-gen claim investigated:
4. 'PlayStation 3 will suffer from antialiasing problems'

Another old favourite from the PlayStation 2 vs Xbox battle, there are two reasons Microsoft is raising the antialiasing issue. The first is it knows this is one of Xbox 360's strengths. Partly this is because Microsoft has decided to forgo the added cost implications and place 10Mb of EDRAM on the graphics chip to deal with problems such as antialiasing, alpha blending and Z-testing without putting any additional load on the graphics chip. As with PlayStation 2, Sony has taken a different route, preferring to let developers deal with such issues using the sheer graphical power available. Potentially, this means some early PlayStation 3 games will probably suffer from aliasing while developers learn the best techniques to deal with the issue. And, of course, the jaggies will be particularly obvious if games support the highest 1,080 progressive scan resolution output. But it shouldn't be viewed as an inherent failure in the console.



be less than the one Xbox had over PlayStation2 in the previous generation. At this level, what becomes far more important to success will be the quality of launch software, which generally boils down to the quality of available tools.

"If one machine is much easier to develop for than the other, it could have a significant advantage in early titles," reckons **Andy Beveridge** of programming tools company SN Systems. "Microsoft's earlier start may help it but it remains to be seen if that lead will last as developers take on more PlayStation 3 development. I don't think it's yet clear whether one of the next-gen machines will be easier to develop for than the other."

A genuine demonstration of PS3 as it exists right now – that is in devkit form with a Cell CPU, unfinished RSX graphics component and robust work-in-progress architecture holding it all together – lies in Electronic Arts' demo for *Fight Night: Round 3* (below)



"Microsoft's earlier start may help it but it remains to be seen if that lead will last as developers take on more PlayStation 3 development"

Tom Williams, technical director at UK devco Climax, agrees: "It's always fun to speculate on performance, but ultimately there are a lot of other factors that determine the quality of the games that will appear on a console. Good tools and support are equally vital."

Certainly in the case of graphics, Sony's decision to partner up with Nvidia means PlayStation 3 developers will have access to robust and well-understood PC development tools such as Nvidia's CG Shader programming language, as well as other utilities such as the NVPerfHUD performance analyser.

Yet it's on the CPU side where developers will have most problems getting to grips with the potential of PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360; something that will take years as well as a widespread re-evaluation of development techniques.

"The move from singlecore to multicore CPUs is going to be a major disruptive change," says





Epic's Unreal Engine 3-powered *Gears Of War* was for many a highlight of the Xbox 360 line-up at E3, although it's worth noting that, unlike games such as *Kameo* and *Perfect Dark Zero*, the demo was not running off official Microsoft devkits. Is this cheating, too?

Andrew Richards of compiler company Codeplay. "For launch titles, developers will just run the main C++ code on one core processor and try to farm out processor-intensive work to other processors. This will work for a while, but not forever. It's too labour intensive and doesn't scale."

Climax's **Tom Williams** says this remains one of the key issues. "The challenge will be working with a multiprocessor architecture," he says. "We've already had to completely rethink the structure of our physics and collision libraries for example, although it's a given that with enough time we'll learn more about leveraging the available power."

Rebellion's technical director **Chris Kingsley** is even more specific about the tools he thinks will be required: "The key to getting the best out of any hardware is good, reliable hardware profilers and great compilers. These tend to take some time to arrive, and it is only when we have the right tools that we can create the best games."

Another important knock-on effect of both architectures is that the GPUs can draw far more polygons than can be stored in memory. Hence to get anywhere close to efficiently using the theoretical throughput available to them, developers will also have to start using procedural rendering techniques. This is a method of generating art assets, including geometry but also eye candy such as water, smoke and cloth effects created using mathematical algorithms run on the CPU rather than piping art assets from DVD into system memory.

"This will require some nifty coding and put a lot of extra strain on the CPUs," Richards points out. "I really think it's going to be years before people properly get to grips with PS3 and 360."

Next-gen claim investigated:
5. 'PlayStation 3 is more powerful than Xbox 360 because it supports dual 1,080p high-definition TVs whereas Xbox 360 supports only one 1,080i TV'

One of Sony's cleverest marketing ploys, the dual-HDTV gimmick has really wound up Microsoft, particularly as it appears to beat the company at its own 'HD Era' game. The truth, however, is more down-to-earth. Even if more than a handful of homes boasted two screens of sufficient resolution, not even PlayStation 3 could output interactive content for two 1,080 progressive scan TVs. Indeed, most commentators seem to agree that Microsoft's stated baseline standard of 720-line progressive scan is sufficient, so this one ends up more or less evens.

Next-gen claim investigated:
6. 'E3's playable Xbox 360 games were only running at half-speed because of the constraints of alpha devkits'

Running on dual-G5 CPUs and an old ATI R300 (as seen in the Radeon 9700 Pro) as opposed to the final trio of dual-thread G5s and the so-called Xenos chip, basic mathematics suggest Xbox 360 developers will have plenty more power available. ATI's Richard Huddy reckons the performance boost with final devkits will be roughly twofold (the official Microsoft line at E3 was that alpha devkits delivered 30 per cent of target hardware power), although this assumes developers will be able to structure their CPU code to take full advantage of the three G5 cores, which is highly unlikely for launch titles.

The other problem in trying to deal with the gap between what a devkit can do and what a promised devkit might be able to do is extremely difficult. This naturally results in a pessimistic scaling back of graphical quality until the finalised hardware actually arrives. "In this situation even a small drop in expected devkit performance can push your game from 60fps to 30fps," reckons Beveridge. "So once they get full-speed hardware, developers will be champing at the bit to tweak their code on that hardware, which can be quite a bit of extra work."

What is clear though is no matter how underpowered the current devkits are or aren't, by the time developers are working on their third or fourth generation games they will have optimised their working techniques sufficiently to be squeezing two or three times the capacity out of the system compared to their launch games.

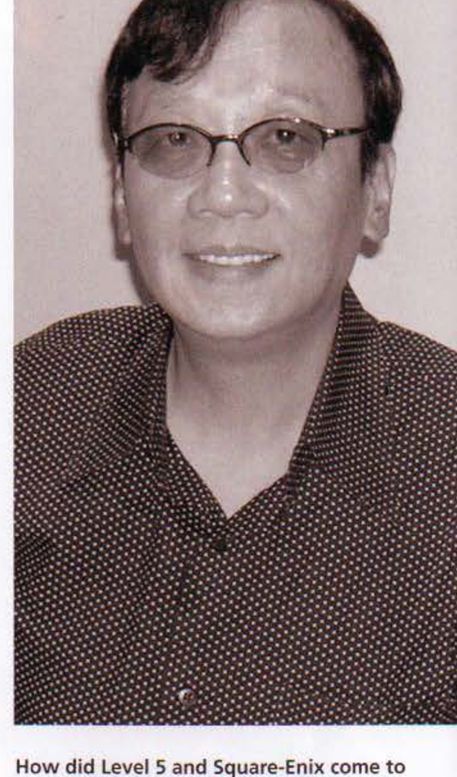


Though Sony claimed its demo of PS3 title *Motor Storm* made use of assets created by developer Evolution Studios, it's believed that the sequence was in fact created entirely by CG specialist RealtimeUK. Again, don't expect this quality from launch games

All's Square in love and war

The men behind Dragon Quest VIII talk about the new challenges of 3D, the secret behind a good puzzle and the perils of moving games online





For the entirety of its prodigious 20-year lifespan, the *Dragon Quest* series has been a stalwart of function over form. The graphic approach of its last major chapter, *Dragon Quest VII*, was traditional almost to a fault, rooted firmly in the ways of its 8- and 16bit predecessors, which may partially account for its cool reception in the west relative to its astronomical success in Japan. With *Dragon Quest VIII*, though, Square-Enix is locking arm-in-arm with Level 5, the team behind *Dark Cloud* and the abortive *True Fantasy Live Online*, and seems laser-targeted toward winning the hearts and minds of the wider world with its near-limitless freedom of exploration, an updated and more graphical menu system for the west, and region-specific voice acting for both Europe and America. We sat down with **Yuji Horii** (above right), creator and designer of the *Dragon Quest* series, and **Akihiro Hino** (above far right), CEO and president of Level 5, to find out more.

"It was very important that we didn't lose the elements that make *Dragon Quest* what it is, even simple things like what colours were used for flowers or the water in the rivers"

How did Level 5 and Square-Enix come to work together?

Akihiro Hino: I've always been a *Dragon Quest* fan – it was actually *Dragon Quest III* that inspired me to become a game creator myself. I've always thought that I wanted to work with Horii-san. The opportunity arose when I heard that Square-Enix and Horii-san were looking for someone to help make *Dragon Quest*, and I thought I'd jump on to that.

YH: At first, they just showed me a very rough prototype of what they could do, but I was completely taken aback when I saw Toriyama's artwork come to life – it blew me away.

***Dragon Quest* games classically have emphasised story and puzzles over graphics, so what brought on this leap to 3D?**

Yuji Horii: Well, even 20 years ago when I created the very first *Dragon Quest*, this is the kind of game I was trying to make. Of course, the hardware wasn't ready back then, but with the outstanding abilities of Level 5, we were able to bring my dream to reality.

What kinds of design changes were necessary in making that leap between 2D and 3D?

AH: It was very difficult.

YH: It's very easy to make a 2D maze, but as soon as you move to 3D it becomes very difficult. Oftentimes when Level 5 would create a 3D maze, we'd play it and we'd say this is too difficult, we have to change it.

AH: Actually, the very first dungeon had another floor to it that we had to take out.

What other kinds of challenges did Level 5 have, recreating 20 years of *Dragon Quest* history from the ground up?

AH: Defining the rules to keep the roots of the game the same – that was the first thing we had to do. First of all, we took as many scenes as we could from the previous games and researched them, to understand what the basis or the idea of the whole series was up to now, and then tried to live up to that. It was very important that we didn't lose the elements that make *Dragon Quest* what it is, even simple things like what colours were used for flowers or the water in the rivers.



The decision to hand development of *Dragon Quest VIII* over to Level 5 was initially surprising, but its ability to create vibrant, appealing characters has served the series well







What differences do you see between eastern and western RPGs nowadays?

YH: American RPGs might have a lot of new elements, but their biggest problem is that they're very unkind toward the player. I think Japanese RPGs are more finely made, delicately made for the user. They're much kinder to the player, and not based on just difficulty level, but more ease of understanding and comprehension, knowing what to do to achieve a goal, or what the result will be when you do something. Just the entry into the game is different between the two.

That said, what of the infamous 'Horii-isms' – puzzles so hard that only you can solve?

YH: [Laughs] There's no such thing as Horii-isms! I think that what I'm making, anybody can understand and would be able to solve. I think the best kind of puzzle is one where the person that solves it thinks: 'I'm the only person that could've solved this'. If everybody says: "Only I can solve that," then it's a good puzzle.

So, 20 years ago, when you visualised *Dragon Quest* in 3D, is this the game you saw?

YH: Yeah, I think it is. Even though the first games were 2D bitmaps, I was trying to measure them as if they were standing up in 3D. It was impossible with the technology back then, but I always wanted to have it so that as you get closer and closer to something in the distance you suddenly realise it's a castle, and you get that joy of finding a castle out of nowhere. Back in those days, you couldn't do that, but this time we can – you do suddenly find towns and buildings from back in the distance. Now that the backgrounds aren't made up of 2D pictures, if you see a mountain off in the distance, it's not just a graphic; you can actually go climb that mountain. The first time I did that, I was so happy to achieve what I'd always set out to do.



Although there was initially some hostility to the idea of a 3D *Dragon Quest*, Level 5 succeeded in delivering Horii's vision

Traditionally, you've said that technology prevented you from bringing *Dragon Quest* online – do you feel like it's now sufficiently caught up?

YH: I am looking into it, it's something I'm thinking about, but it's not something I can say anything specific about. I do think that being in a world with other people around you makes it much more fun.

And obviously that would be something that Level 5 has a good deal of experience with.

AH: [Smiling wryly, much to the general amusement of his colleagues] Ahhh, yes. Yes we do.

Newswire



Import restrictions

Despite online retailer Play-Asia complying with Sony's demands that it cease the sale of PSP hardware and software to the UK, the console manufacturer's ongoing battle against importers is becoming less straightforward by the day. Following revelations by Dan Morelle of importer Electric Birdland that Sony, in fact, owns the trademarks for neither the initials PSP (instead patented by UK firm Owtanet Ltd) nor XMB (an operating-system component currently unregistered), the argument for the defence has become an embarrassing one. It centres not only on the rights of the consumer, but on what Morelle and several other independent companies see as hypocrisy in both Sony's reluctance to go after larger retailers such as Amazon, and the alleged readiness of SCEE's own employees to obtain their PSPs from his company.

SOUND BYTES

"She is a very visual person and sees beauty in the craziest of places. Julia is a sharing person: she spent the last year in a hut in the jungle teaching children art, and how to play the drums on a home-made kit."
The excruciating **www.playstationfreedom.co.uk**

Sir Michael Caine: Well, the first game I'll be interested in is this one. It'll be my introduction. I'll get the machine... I've seen trailers for them on the television. Everything blows up instantly.
Christian Bale: Yes, everything's exploding. I like the old-school games as well, though. I go down to the arcade and play *Galaga* or *Pac-Man*...
Caine: Hey, you know all about it.
Bale: They had one stick and that's it, that's all you'd have.
Caine: The simple days.
Bale: Whereas nowadays it's 20 buttons.
Caine: Is it that addictive?
Bale: Yeah. And they're blinding us as well. After you play them, and then you can't really see properly for a number of hours afterwards. You dream it, you know.
Gaming's unlikeliest ambassadors digress their way through an interview with IGN

"Seeing the nine-foot-tall Red Pyramid wander around alongside the four-foot grey children somehow makes the mood on the set oddly joyful."
Silent Hill movie scribe **Roger Avary**, clearly unaffected by his subject matter

INTERVIEW

God of war

Flying the flag of Sega, Creative Assembly reveals how it's still commanding the troops

When the publishing giant known for its role in defining both arcade and console gaming acquires the UK's most reputed strategy developer, heads turn and alarm bells sound. But though Sega may be big and *Spartan: Total Warrior* is most definitely a fearsome console game, the legacy and future of its creator appears to be in good hands. If anything, in fact, it's Creative Assembly that's giving the orders, as development director **Mike Simpson** explains.

Why did Creative decide to merge with Sega?
Developers have always gotten a very small slice of the pie – they see little of the revenue from their games. To a degree, it's nice to work that way, but you won't fill a car park with Ferraris.

"It's really about taking advantage of the opportunities that we've opened up and being able to do more than we could have done on our own"

For individual developers, it's also very true that one bad game will kill you – maybe you'd get away with it if you were lucky. We decided that there were different things that we wanted to do with *Total War*, and that with Sega we'd be able to do those things while taking a larger slice. So it's really about taking advantage of the opportunities that we've opened up and being able to do more than we could have done on our own.


Mike Simpson, The Creative Assembly's development director, worked on projects at Mirrorsoft and Psygnosis before joining the company to oversee the growth of the *Total War* series

Are you retaining a fair degree of autonomy?
Yes. Sega want us for what we do – they don't want to break anything. That is one thing that publishers sometimes do: when they acquire developers they sometimes assimilate them, often destroying the very thing they bought them for. I've seen that happen quite a number of times, actually, but we're still in control of the projects we do.

Would you say that a climate has emerged in the UK industry where it's inadvisable for developers to stay independent?
It's hard for me to speak about other developers because, ethically, we've always been a bit odd in the situations we find ourselves in. We've always had our own IP and pretty much complete control over what we do. Most developers don't have that, so – I don't know, there's definitely a place for independent developers still and it is where you get a lot of the more interesting games coming out. It's something we'll have to fight hard to preserve.

With *Spartan: Total Warrior*, were you keen to preserve a certain level of historical accuracy despite the game's mythical overtones?
An action game like *Spartan* doesn't need to do that – it wouldn't be as good if you did. If you tried to produce something historical, it wouldn't be nearly as much fun. In a way, the basic idea of most action games where you're in control of one hero and fighting to make a difference that way – there's nothing remotely realistic about it. We take lots of flavour from history rather than history itself. We put it in a setting that people are going to recognise and feel comfortable with but without trying to do anything overt.

Is *Spartan* a recognition that the needs of the



console market are different to those of the PC? Did you ever consider adapting the existing *Total War* framework instead?
It is different – porting a game like *Rome* on to console would be difficult, if not impossible. It isn't the kind of thing that console players are looking for, certainly. Having said that, I think there are possibilities there for games that are closer to *Rome* in style. There are possibilities, but you do have to be aware of the differences with consoles. If you've got a game where you're expected to play through 100 hours of gameplay in four- to five-hour stints at a time, it's not entirely suited to the console fraternity.

Are you planning on supporting console games like *Spartan* following their release?
Something we've been talking about is exactly how you go about doing that. It's something we're thinking about, yes.

What was the philosophy behind the support of your PC titles? Were the expansion packs released as a means of funding new generations of game engine?
That is part of it, I suppose. Part of it's ensuring that you exploit what you've got and with those types of games it's always easy to give the player more. A lot of people are also hankering for more. With our expansions, we tend to not just put more content in – with a lot of expansions it's basically the same game but with a few differences. With us, there's usually a major difference in gameplay – the way the game plays is different.

Has Sega ever asked you to introduce traditionally Japanese elements to your work?
No – you're not going to find us doing *Sonic: Total War*, that's not going to happen. Lots of Sonics against lots of little Nintendo guys would be fun, but we're going to stick to what we do best. Although I would like to do another *Shogun* one day, just to show them that we can do Japanese content as well as or better than they can. It's interesting. I think Japanese content has different appeals in different areas of the world. There's a law against it in China – it's 'promoting Japanese militarism' if you do it there. But I'd love to do it as an art project.

OUT THERE

GUNS, GUNS, GUNS!

It's rare for a game maker to sum up his creation so succinctly, but Kenta Cho has no qualms about the appeal of his new shmup, *Gunroar*. By his geometrically abstract standards, this is a radically realistic game, seeing you pilot a gunboat through barely discernable islands and atolls, your wake spreading behind you like the gentlest of bullet patterns. The innovation this time is in the movement system, which locks when firing, but both turns and strafes your ship when free. It takes some getting used to, but even when played as a straight vertical shooter it's still enthralling: another spectacular vision from one of the most reliably prolific independent developers around.

● www.asahi-net.or.jp/~cs8k-cyu/windows/gr_e.html

EVENT

Onedotzero mixes it up

You could look, but you couldn't touch at the yearly showreel of gaming style

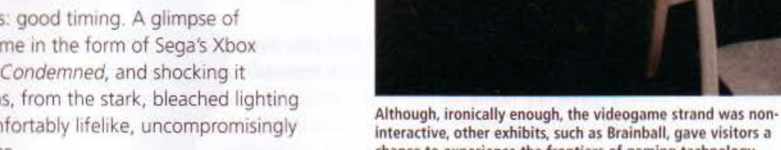
Onedotzero's ninth annual festival at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts (from May 27 to June 5) explored the vanguard of new media and the moving image. A varied programme stretched from Scottish anime to Swedish interactive installations via advertising, architecture and, in the latest compilation in the Lens Flare series, the imagery of videogames.

Lens Flare's cinema screening of videogame clips began largely as a showcase for CGI, but times have moved on. This year's selection was a wide-ranging blend of cut-scenes and in-game action, realtime and rendered visuals and handheld, current and next-generation console formats. The boundaries between all these things, once so distinct, are blurring fast. Seeing *Resident Evil 4* presented like a film underlines how flawlessly it integrates the visual languages of cinema and games.

More than half of what was shown was generated in realtime on current gaming hardware, but was certainly not found lacking for spectacle, be it in *Spartan: Total Warrior*'s cast of thousands or *Burnout Revenge*'s tortuous camera effects. *Killer 7*, *Project Rub* and the ravishing *Okami* showed how abstract traditions as varied as pop art and scroll painting can find eloquent expression in games. Meanwhile, *Conker: Live & Reloaded* and *Lego Star Wars* made simple fun out of multilayered, multimedia humour by using the oldest of all comic devices: good timing. A glimpse of the future came in the form of Sega's Xbox 360 shocker *Condemned*, and shocking it genuinely was, from the stark, bleached lighting to the uncomfortably lifelike, uncompromisingly brutal violence.

While it was heartening to see such solid representations of games as they look in their natural state, it is reasonable for an event with onedotzero's remit to acknowledge the form's significant contribution to the CGI arts. If nothing else, giving *World Of WarCraft*'s dazzling introduction an airing on the big screen is only fair, equal as it is to much of Hollywood's digital output in terms of raw quality. But in the context of a festival dedicated to experimentation, the bombast and hackneyed devices of most trailers and cut-scenes were a reminder of videogames' increasingly conservative aesthetic. In fact, it was the faux-gameplay firstperson style seen in that notorious 'imagining' of *Killzone 2* (as well as a similar, stunningly evocative piece for *Far Cry: Instincts*) that represented the most thrilling and inventive digital film-making in the programme, as well as the most distinct to videogames.

If there was one disappointment in Lens Flare, it was the absence of the demo pods that it had been hoped would be included for the first time, giving attendees a chance to experience videogame visuals in full by manipulating them. It was ironic that games remained a spectator sport while installations elsewhere in the ICA allowed festival-goers to interact with generative computer art, or – in the case of a witty brainwave-controlled ball game in which the victor was the most relaxed – stir thoughts about the true nature of play. Games will struggle to gain recognition as an art form as long as curators struggle with the thorny problem of how to exhibit them. Here's hoping onedotzero continues to look for answers.



Although, ironically enough, the videogame strand was non-interactive, other exhibits, such as Brainball, gave visitors a chance to experience the frontiers of gaming technology



Photography: Tom Bland



One of the more intriguing exhibits (left) featured two computers which used webcams to spy on each other's screens and then manipulated what they could see to create unpredictable images



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

No matter how good an event GDC is, it has two major drawbacks: it's pricey to get in, and you're all too likely to find that the three sessions you desperately want to see all clash with each other. Don't despair. It may be a few months down the line, but the organisers have now made videos of some of the standout presentations available free online. Alongside Will Wright's startling unveiling of *Spore*, you can see the slides and doodles that accompanied Takahashi's explanation of *Katamari Damacy*'s genesis (reprinted in E149), hear Masaya Matsuura lay out his vision for the commercial and creative future of gaming, and watch Atsushi Inaba discuss the lessons learned from making *Viewtiful Joe*.

Site:
GDTV
URL:
www.pqhp.com/cmp/gdctv

EVENT

The art of gaming

Los Angeles plays host to the most innovative electronic entertainment celebration of all time

How does a gallery exhibit celebrating the roots of gaming's past find its genesis? Fittingly, with similarly retro inspiration: "I was looking at my pal Jorge's renditions of He-Man he did a few years back," says curator **Jon Gibson**. "They were uniquely his creations while retaining that iconic look of Skeletor and the muscleman himself. I thought – probably mid-shower – that'd be a cool way to approach old-school games.

"Critics whine all the time about games not being art – it's like a reflex. I thought doing an art show themed with '80s games would be the perfect retort. I'd being making the rounds in the lowbrow art scene here in LA, and realised that there's this whole generation of 20-something artists that grew up with pixels. After doing some research, I realised that no one had attempted such an exhibition before." With his bathtime revelation now upon him, the wheels were set in motion.

In contrast to gaming's usual appreciation of its own visual accomplishment, i am 8-bit's focus is more on the culture of gamers

Gibson's choice of venue couldn't have been more apt – LA's Gallery 1988/Acme Game Store is, as you might expect, a fortuitously adjacent independent videogame store and 'youth-oriented' art gallery, and with the perfect locale secured, the only thing that remained was selecting artists and pieces. "About half were friends and half went in blind, saying: 'Love your art! You dig games?' The response was pretty ecstatic, surprisingly."

The resulting show drew a similarly ecstatic crowd, for the art as much as for the spectacle, which was provided by a special guest appearance by G4TV's eight-foot functional NES controller. The controller, sadly, wasn't there for our attendance at the show's closing night, having been relocated to G4TV's E3 booth, but the spectacle remained. In contrast to gaming's usual gallery appreciation of its own visual accomplishment – stiflingly framed, hung and lit concept paintings, sketches and renders – i am 8-bit's fare and focus is more on the shared culture of gamers, celebrating, remixing and reimagining all of the icons of our youth – and that's icon in every sense of the word, from in-game collectible to proto-religious. Nearly all of the show's works, be they painting, plush or plastic, crowded and burst from all surrounding walls with as much colourful energy and exuberance for their subject matter as players were forced to ascribe to the real-life minimalist originals. But others, like Greg Simkins' Pac-Man In Hospice, recognising how long-in-the-tooth all of the ancient stars are now growing, paints Pac-Man at retirement age, confined to a rocking chair and now toothless, only able to receive pellets from an IV tube, while Q*Bert and Coily rest forlornly on their nearby cubic pyramid, exhausted from the decades of tireless struggle. The show also brought solid-state hardware rockers 8 Bit Weapon out for the crowd, along with their friend and original Blue Sky Ranger Keith Robinson, to celebrate not just the sights but the sounds of the era, blending Commodores, Intellivision synthesisers and Game Boys.

With the rousing success of the show (nearly 80 per cent of the deliberately cut-rate pieces sold), i am 8-bit, far from being a one-hit wonder, has found new life not just as a happening, but as a brand: sales of the limited-edition *Excitebike* T-shirt were brisk enough that Gibson plans to expand and diversify the shirt line-up with further designs from the show, in addition to offering limited prints and one-inch badges of the show's works, and Chronicle Books is publishing the show catalogue in April of 2006, just in time for next E3's sequel, i am 8-bit: version 2.006.



OUT THERE



RESTLESS SCREEN

With two game-to-movie adaptations in production (excluding the relentless output of Uwe Boll), we'll withhold our opinions of both Paul W S Anderson and his Dead Or Alive project for the sake of avoiding litigation. Instead, it's a pleasure to reveal that Christophe Gans' (Crying Freeman, Brotherhood Of The Wolf) take on Konami's *Silent Hill* series, penned by Tarantino associate Roger Avary and scored by original composer Akira Yamaoka, is looking very promising indeed. Together with production designer Carol Spier (Existenz), Gans is reportedly adhering to the series' trademark style of garish monochrome dashed with aggressive post-processing. A nine-foot Pyramid Head has been spotted striding about the set, while Sean Bean, Radha Mitchell and Deborah Kara Unger represent the cast's better-known faces. Were it not for the need to type, our fingers would be crossed to the point of breaking.

Newswire



The ice storm

As the ongoing legal dispute between Blizzard and the makers of alternative gaming client BnetD finally takes to the courts, the question surrounding who is in the right persists. Is it the *WarCraft* developer, whose stance has been refined from a declaration of war on piracy to a more fundamental attack on those that deconstruct its products? Or is it the defendants – those that seek to provide a free alternative means by which to play authentic Blizzard games online, and are pursuing an alteration to the Digital Millennium Copyright Act to legitimise reverse engineering? We wish we could say that there was no crime in bettering existing software to benefit the end-user, but while that practice is forced to employ the same tools and means as the cracking community, the situation is unlikely to change.



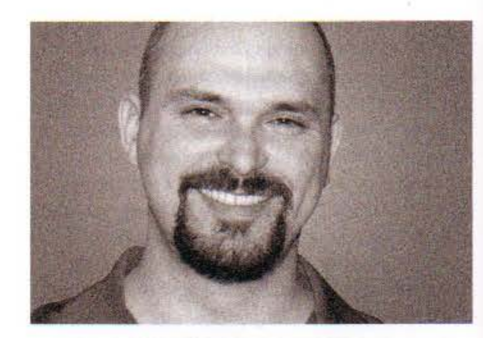
INTERVIEW

Free-roaming Radical

Radical Entertainment's Vlad Ceraldi on making 'games for fans but not necessarily gamers'

Radical Entertainment's licence-heavy impact in recent times may not be one that's been warmly welcomed by gaming's staunchest fans, but it's one that's nonetheless hard to ignore. Both *The Simpsons: Road Rage* and *The Hulk* have sold over three million copies, and *The Simpsons: Hit & Run* has managed a further million beyond that, as well as notoriety for making the top ten sales chart of 2004 in the UK despite being released the previous year. One of Canada's top 100 employers, Radical's next title – *The Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction* – appears more promising than anything it's yet produced. We spoke to **Vlad Ceraldi** (right), producer at Radical, about the impact of *GTA* and the massmarket game as next-generation hardware approaches.

The next wave of hardware is looming, and many publishers are thinking about creating games for the massmarket. Are imitations and extensions of games like *GTA III* and *Need For Speed Underground* still the way forward?



What I learned from *GTA*, and what was eye opening for the industry, is that it isn't necessarily about violence but about giving the player a world that feels free from constraints. A world where you've got a lot of unexpected things to do, things that the designers may not have intended but still work based on the rules of the world; it's free will – how many moves you're given, how many objects there are and how the world reacts between those two things helps create that freedom. That's what *GTA* started – and I'm sure there are other examples, but that series is the clearest example for what was a paradigm change. But to be fair to the rest of the industry, it was time for that; consoles had finally become powerful enough for it to happen. But there's still plenty of room for all sorts of games, especially linear ones. I've just finished *Resident Evil 4*, and I loved that.

Are the free-roaming natures of *Hit & Run* and *Ultimate Destruction* something that you wanted to explore, or just a means to an end?

They're something I wanted to explore, along with my team. In both games there's a lot of content to uncover and delve into, for the fan of each series.



Simpsons: Hit & Run wraps a decent engine around the heart of its licence – a step up from forebear *Simpsons: Road Rage*, that simply wrapped a new skin around *Crazy Taxi*



Freedom works well with The Hulk, too. He's not the kind of guy who works well with boundaries, with being put in a room. We did that with the first game – we didn't let you jump up high, not for technical reasons, but for world-design reasons. In this one you can jump, run, destroy without boundaries, and leap off a 60-storey building with a soldier in your hand. That freedom is vital.

There's nothing hollow about *Hulk: Ultimate Destruction*'s title, the game unleashing its protagonist's anger-management issues with boundless energy through a satisfyingly versatile action engine

How exhausting is development of a free-roaming game? Do you feel that after these two you want to go on to develop something more restrictive?

Yeah, I want to do a dance game! Freedom is incredibly challenging in both the technical and design aspects. You have to give players lots of things to do, which is a scary thing about next-gen development, and the amount of content you'll have to stream. We stream lots of in-game stuff – audio, dialogue and animations – and there's no way any of those bits will fit into the memory. When you consider the limitations of current consoles, what's going on with them is an incredible thing. With next-gen, you're still going to have to stream everything, but there's going to be ten times as much content, so even if we have ten times the amount of memory to access, the amount of content we're going to have to create is going to be intense. They're not easy to make, and that's why there's so relatively few of them. Even now, you can count them on both hands.

How wary were you of the *GTA* series when creating *Hit & Run* and *Ultimate Destruction*?

To this day, I have not played *GTA*. My designers very probably have, but I haven't. Many of our design elements we added came out of that sandbox ideal. As soon as you enter that playground, and begin building a world and engine for it, a whole host of other issues come up that have nothing to do with *GTA*. In fact, I'd say Rockstar North got the free-roaming structure into their game because of that exact same thing: they probably started out with a 'what if we did this...' idea, and all of a sudden – boom! – a whole range of possibilities came from it, and they only chose one of them, and then a whole new range of possibilities came from that. They didn't design the entire thing purely from scratch, I'm sure of that, and it's likely to be the same route that we took. Our games have been called *GTA* clones, and whether it's to our advantage or not is for other people to determine. But that wasn't what we sat down to do. It was just evolution. We wanted things to interact with each other, and *Hit & Run* just grew from *The Simpsons: Road Rage*, and along with that a lot of new design principles sprung up that we had to handle.

Do you think modern videogames do a good job of offering enjoyment without asking for a minimum of commitment and skill?

I don't know. I always think about who's playing our game – that they shouldn't have to be an expert to see all the content that they paid for, and the ending. There are certainly some games that go overboard and make things way too hard. And they're popular within a very niche group, but I can't see why you shouldn't be able to make a game for everybody, somehow. Maybe we're not making *Ultimate Destruction* for young kids or not for flight-sim fans, but we are making it for someone who's a fan of action games, a fan of The Hulk or a fan of Marvel properties. Some of the choices we make are not popular with the hardcore gamers, but they will be popular with the fans we're aiming at. It's about making games for fans but not necessarily for gamers.

Recently, Radical's output has improved somewhat over its past releases (*Dark Summit* and *The Simpsons: Road Rage*, for example). What's changed within the company?

We liken it to getting a huge boulder moving. It's a tough job, and some companies do it quickly, through luck, through timing, through flukes, through talent and combinations of all those things. For us, it's been lots of hard, diligent work. Things are moving, we're not letting it stop and it gets easier to move as we go. A lot of it is based on lessons learned by maybe doing things wrong and by not forgetting what we did right. Not every game we make will be to everyone's taste, but it'll definitely be true to whatever fan base we're delivering for.

DEALS

Devcos face up to reality

With next-gen coming fast, publishers are scrambling to make sure they're prepared – by buying up studios

The headline 'Publisher Buys Developer' has become so commonplace it doesn't really count as a headline any more. Which isn't to say news that one of the world's top ten publishers, Vivendi Universal Games, has bought Birmingham-based Swordfish Studios isn't important to the companies and individuals concerned. For one thing, it secures the future of the 40 or so Swordfish staff who, having gone through the collapse of their previous employer Rage, will no doubt be relieved their monthly wage cheques are now on a firmer footing. It also marks something of a turnaround for Vivendi, a company that as recently as 2003 was up for sale itself. Since then it has slashed back employment at its US development offices, been sued by *Half-Life* developer Valve and seen high-profile departures from its flagship Blizzard studio, before finally turning the corner with the successful launch of *World Of WarCraft*, which already has over two million paying subscribers. To that degree, both Swordfish and Vivendi are examples of the rollercoaster ride that is working in the games industry.



Cold Winter wasn't the game it could have been, but nonetheless stands as one of the finer PS2 shooters while exemplifying Swordfish's deftness with RenderWare. Clearly, Vivendi was equally impressed



Radical, developer of the likes of *Simpsons: Hit & Run* and *Hulk: Ultimate Destruction* (above), is another studio selling out to a publishing force, having recently inked a deal with Vivendi

"All companies are for sale at the right price," argues **Nick Gibson** of business consultants Game Investor. "Vivendi is obviously rejuvenated at present and likes what it's seen having worked with Swordfish on the *Cold Winter* game. For Swordfish, the deal ensures its future. Actually I think at the moment, it's a good time to be an independent developer. Publishers are commissioning more games and the ongoing consolidation in the market means the weaker players who undercut prices have dropped out."

And consolidation is certain to continue. Gibson says: "Developers are looking for a smooth transition, particularly in terms of investing in next-generation tools and technology, and that means having a strong publishing partner."

Equally, from the point of view of publishers, they're keen to add development capacity so they can build the bigger teams required for Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 games while ensuring a flow of games for the existing 100-million Xboxes and PlayStation 2s. US publisher Activision recently bought PC/Mac specialist Beenox, which had worked on the PC versions of *Shrek 2* and *THUG2*, adding to the previous purchases of *Madagascar* developer Toys For Bob and porting specialist Vicarious Visions. The fact Activision still has $800 million cash sitting in its bank account means it's likely there are more deals to be done.

However attractive being bought out can be for some independents, the fact remains that the current trend is making it harder and harder for solo studios to survive. The old idea that delivering a strong seller on budget and on time would be enough to ensure a lasting relationship with a publisher no longer holds up. As publishers devote more and more of their budgets to marketing, investing in strengthening a brand they don't own makes less and less sense, and small independents can be left facing a stark choice: do badly and go bust, or do well and get bought.



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Platypus

www.squashysoftware.com

At a time when Capcom, through the fluid watercolours of *Okami* and the block-printed boldness of *Killer 7*, is focusing the game's industry's attention on just how fresh games can look, it's frustrating to see how little impact their visions are having. Games are mostly still in thrall to 'cinematic realism', or at best look to their own past for more abstract ideas. It's heartening, then, to look back at games like *Platypus*, which uses stop-motion claymation not just for inspiration, but for the actual, photographed source of much of its graphics.

The game itself feels a little like a rip-off of a rip-off, owing as much to games like *Parodius* and *Xenon 2* as those games owed to their own inspirations. And, as with those games, that heritage is no bad thing. But even if the gameplay seems a little over-familiar, the sights and sounds of clay airships exploding in a earthy splat, complete with tiny clay men parachuting out in panic, is well worth the trip. *Platypus*' makers have for some time now been at work on a new game, *Cletus Clay* – keep an eye on their website for updates.

Sun shines on the UK's gaming summer

A season of shows, screenings and conferences brings gaming to the public

Another summer, another new range of acronyms to learn – GDCE stands alone as the only event with a familiar set of initials

After the downfall of ECTS, last year was supposed to be the year the UK got its act together – with consumers, developers and industry catered for across the Game Stars Live, EDF and EGN events. The Docklands offensive, however, ended in failure, with organisers unable to convince exhibitors to commit to a second year.

As a consequence, 2005 is shaping up to be a year with just as full a calendar, but with a mix of old and new names. For the development community, the Game Developers Conference Europe (sponsored by TIGA) will be held at Le Meridian Hotel in London from August 30 to September 1. The industry will have a chance to do its deals at a new event, Games Market Europe (GME), to be held at the Business Design Centre in London from August 31 to September 1. Run by Andy Lane, who previously organised ECTS, the event intends to answer industry's call for a serious-minded trade show with fixed-sized booths and extensive meeting room facilities.

Again, the irony is that it's gamers that the videogame industry has the hardest time catering for. Although Nintendo has its own roadshow, Sony is unveiling its elaborate 'Freedom'-themed series of events, and Microsoft may be fronting a substantial consumer show at the Birmingham NEC in October, there's no one event catering for the public. As such, the Edinburgh Interactive Entertainment Festival (August 10-14), with its mixed programme of industry sessions and publicly accessible screenings and game demos, remains perhaps the most appealing prospect.

Continue

Mercenaries
Resident Evil 4 continues to prove its worth

Wood veneer
Matching 360 and Game Boy Micro, anyone?

Capcom originals
Brilliant, fresh thinking for titles old and new

Quit

Gun emplacements
Since when did they become obligatory?

Tiny DS carts
Too easy to lose, and too time-consuming to replay

Capcom ports
Are ten PSP ports the price we pay for *Okami*?

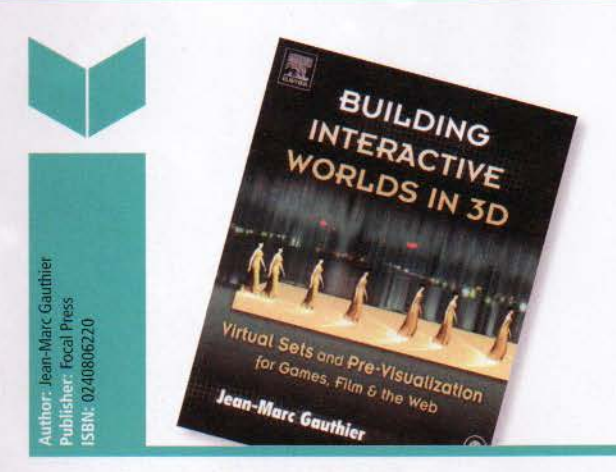


EVERYTHING BAD IS GOOD FOR YOU

A discussion of societal trends that tells us something we probably knew already

In a fierce riposte to the conventional wisdom, which blames the ills of society on Hollywood-inspired sex and violence, dumbed-down reality-TV shows and adolescent years wasted on videogames, Johnson's claim is that, in contrast, such lowbrow culture has actually made people smarter without them even realising it. To some degree, this is a comparative argument. Contrast the simple stories lines of 1970s hit entertainment such as Starsky And Hutch with current equivalents – 24 or The Sopranos – and it's easy to see how TV has developed from a passive linear experience to something forcing its audience to keep track of many twists and false trails in the complex relationships between characters and plotlines. Movies such as Usual Suspects and Memento have taken matters even further, demanding more than one viewing. And similarly for games, which have transformed from the simple actions required to succeed at *Pong* to the deep analysis of data and systems of *SimCity*.

More radical is Johnson's conclusion that the skills taught in this manner have – within the confines of the usual chicken-and-egg debate – come to shape the way society works. In the always-connected, short-term contracted world, the ability to find new ways to understand ruled-based systems, quickly absorb dense amount of related data and keep track of dozens of remote contacts has become as important as traditional skills such as reading and writing.



BUILDING INTERACTIVE WORLDS IN 3D

Tutorials and ideas to build a world of your own

With an explosion in the free learning editions of art packages such as Maya and Softimage, not to mention the rise in university game-related courses, there's no lack of information on offer for those interested in carving out their own piece of virtuality. Building Interactive Worlds In 3D provides different in approach to your typical Ten Steps To A *Half-Life 2* Mod however. In the main, this comes from the varied background of its author who has plied his trade as an architect, visual artist, filmmaker and, potentially most damming, new media consultant. But don't let that put you off. Coming at the process of making interactive worlds from a non-gaming viewpoint proves to be a refreshing break, as Gauthier ropes in learned friends from the academic and art world to ponder ideas such as 'what is the importance of the viewer in the design of the virtual space?' even before getting down to business and creating his 3D models, environments and animation loops.

Of course, there are plenty of detailed tutorials for those keen to use the split polygon tool too, although as an aside modelling is carried out in Maya and LightWave, neither of which are on the book's CD. What is provided is a version of the Virtools pre-visualisation package, which is used to set up the interaction between objects, cameras and players. And this is where Gauthier comes into his own with particularly thought-provoking chapters on issues such as camera set-up and pathfinding.

INCOMING

Announcements and updates

Star Soldier
FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** HUDSON SOFT



From widescreen to highscreen, Hudson gives the handheld market a twist with a port of the remake of the 1986 shooter

Alan Wake
FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** REMEDY



Lost in a Lynchian broken dream, can artistic use of superior hardware make an individual of Remedy's *Silent Hill* reprise?

Double Steal: Second Clash
FORMAT: XBOX **PUBLISHER:** BUNKASHA



Only slated for release in Japan, the Wreckless sequel attempts to build on its exquisite looks with some less haphazard gameplay

Darkwatch
FORMAT: PS2, XBOX **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT



Now with Ubisoft, High Moon's vampire western FPS continues to build upon its already intriguing art style and detailed mythos

Hudson Pinball
FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** HUDSON SOFT



Again, lateral thinking goes vertical as Hudson's second PSP turnaround offers fans a more straightforward control system

True Crime 2
FORMAT: PS2, XBOX **PUBLISHER:** ACTIVISION



Having teased gamers with the identity of its real-world location, glimpses of Luxoflux's expansive sequel continue to seep out

James Bond: From Russia With Love
FORMAT: GC, PS2, XBOX **PUBLISHER:** EA



Connery last appeared as 007 in Never Say Never Again. Hopefully we won't end up cursing EA's belief in that motto

Yarudora Portable: Double Cast
FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** SCEI



Sony's handheld adaptation of the Sugar & Rockets interactive dramas starts now, with the next three episodes arriving shortly

Sengoku Cannon
FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** XNAUTS



Psikyo's *Sengoku Ace Episode III* is testing the water. Will the PSP provide an chance for Japan's shooter teams to scrape a living?

Gihren's Ambition: Zeon's Legacy
FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** BANDAI



This SRPG Gundam adaptation blends the original PS1 game with its appendices, remastering over 45 minutes of cinematics

Dig Dug: Digging Strike
FORMAT: DS **PUBLISHER:** NAMCO



Namco resurrects another classic with DS efficiency, rethinking the *Mr Driller* approach with a blend of the first two instalments

The Curse Of The Were-Rabbit
FORMAT: GC, PC, PS2, XBOX **PUBLISHER:** FRONTIER



A seamless, sprawling world is promised by gaming's odd couple of Frontier and Aardman, crammed with eccentric NPCs







The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe, Taxi Driver, Scarface: The World Is Yours, Jaws Unleashed, Never Say Never Again: five movie-licensed titles of varying quality from E3 that represent one possible future for videogaming

SOMETHING ABOUT

Japan

The last word on E3

Game producer Brick Bardo offers his (hungry) take on events in LA



It has been two years since I've had the E3 experience. I don't know why, but if I had to pick out one particular thing out about this E3, I would say the barbecue vendors. These are found outside all the different halls of the convention centre, and I remember finding them packed with people forming incredibly long queues! What the hell was going on? These queues literally amazed me. The reason was even more surprising: the west hall was out of electricity – complete blackout – so the main cafeteria was shut. Come on! We are talking about the world's biggest videogame show! How is it possible that such a thing could happen? Hopefully this problem did not have a serious impact on the booths, but it really did damage the restaurant inside the convention centre. I won't even mention the impact it had on over-sized people like me! There are so many of us in this industry... and without any food, I was not feeling that well! Well, I guess this is my main impression of E3...

What? Is that my E3? No, of course not! This year was special. It was the time when the three next-generation consoles were unveiled. What about these three consoles? Well, let's say PS3 had the biggest impact and the only impression I had about it was: "Oh God, what are we going to do now..." It is clear that the videos they displayed on the big screen were very impressive, but what we will we really get at launch? Many aspects of these 'demos' could not possibly run in realtime on the machine, but I have to admit all these companies delivered very high quality videos. Then I wonder how many people, how much time and money would be necessary to make a single game out of what was shown onscreen. I guess we are talking two or three times the total cost of a PS2 game. "Now, creators have the power to deliver their creation without any concessions..." I guess that's right, but I believe that only the small number of companies will be able to afford this power. I'm sure that PS3 is out of reach of many developers and publishers. I think that, as a pure gamer, I would be very pleased at the prospect of such a console. However, as a game developer, I have to admit that the more I think about it the more my head hurts. So this was the main thought I got seeing the new hardware, but what about the games? I mean, E3 is not just about new hardware, right?

It is clear that the videos they displayed on the big screen were very impressive, but what we will we really get at launch? Many aspects of these 'demos' could not possibly run in realtime on the machine

Games based on movies are nothing new and they represent a big portion of the titles displayed at E3. But this year was especially full of those kind of games. For instance, there was *Star Wars: Episode III*, *Narnia*, *Madagascar*, *Harry Potter*, *King Kong*, *Aeon Flux*. Older movies were also heavily represented on the show floor, with games like *The Godfather*, *From Russia With Love*, *Taxi Driver*, *Scarface* and *Jaws*. I thought *Jaws* would be some



It's Ken Kutaragi, again, with his shiny new console, again. Next month: no more photos of Sony's PS3. That's a promise

kind of shark-hunt game, but I was surprised to see it was in fact something else: you are the shark and get to hunt people! Is it going to be a great game? I really hope so! A shark game!

Because of the power the next generation of consoles will provide, a new era of games will open with a very similar visual quality to movies. Most of the companies now have very high technological standards. So looking at games today, it is rare to see something very bad. However, because these games are all based on a very small number of genres, they don't offer much originality. To compensate, companies are trying to bring in famous licences and names. The coming explosion of development costs is making this trend even stronger: game makers will focus more than ever on famous names and sequels to popular series. This is so obvious. Famous creators may have enough power and enough of an aura to risk bringing something new, but imagine a new creator who gets a brilliant idea – a new concept with promising potential. I wonder how many producers would give him carte blanche to develop it and how many companies would agree to risk their resources. But if new creators aren't given a chance, the industry will without any doubt continue to deteriorate. To be honest, I fear the worst.

And so, as I sit outside the convention centre, eating the barbecue chicken I bought after queuing for a very long time, I'm thinking gloomy thoughts about the future of this industry.

See you!

And this is the last photo from E3 '05 you'll see in **Edge**. At least until another contributor decides that something more needs to be written about it. Something involving barbecued chicken, possibly

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Project Gotham Racing 3



E3 footage suspicions aside, Bizarre Creations' technical ambition and steadfast dedication should make this a blazing start to the Formula 360 season – at 60fps, we hope.
360, MICROSOFT

Prey



Despite making use of the *Doom 3* engine, this 3D Realms/Humanhead FPS looks far from generic. But there's no doubting that some of the subject matter is dark indeed.
360, PC, 2K GAMES

Chou Shittou Caduceus



Reports of Japanese players snapping their DSes shut in disgust when playing is due not to the game's quality, but its powerfully squeam-inducing gameplay.
DS, ATLUS

Shut up. Shut up. Just shut up

Gamers have heard it all before, thousands of times over



Even when game characters have personalities which explain their monomania, like *Beyond Good & Evil*'s Double H with his magnificent reliance on the works of Carlson and Peters, it needs skill and restraint to prevent their outbursts from becoming hollow soundbites

There's a magical moment that comes early in many games, usually very soon after you've taken control of the main character or met their closest companion. You know little about them so far – not gained much sense of their capabilities, priorities or personalities – and so you test them out, pulling off some moves, firing a few rounds, bashing the odd block, and as you do they let a little of themselves slip. Something on which your entire relationship with them will be founded. They mutter something under their breath, or shout out in brash triumph, or slide in a sly wisecrack. And then your heart freezes and you take a deep breath and prepare to discover whether or not you hate their game.

Not because of them, or their characterisation (or desperate lack of it), or even their ropey dialogue. Your hopes at this stage, heart in mouth, hinge on how long it will be before they say that phrase again. Will they say it once a minute? Once every ten minutes? Once every ten seconds? Or – a slender hope indeed – will they say it once?

There are good reasons for giving game characters soundbites. There's no question it adds some personality and injects a little life into the game. On occasion, it can be a crucial informational tool, giving feedback on character actions. But too many games are still plagued by characters who spool out the same phrase over and over and over and over and over. Within the first ten minutes. It's entirely baffling – at what point in the game's development does this seem like a good thing? Can it really be technically insuperable to ensure that they're rationed out sanely? Nor is it the answer to give your hero three different soundbites which he interchanges every 20 seconds, over and over and over. There's no dialogue well enough written, no script well enough acted to survive that level of repetition. Very rapidly, it makes a mockery of the idea of using these snippets to enhance characterisation, emphasising instead that these creations are just dumb puppets. There is no credible excuse for it.

In the end, even in exceptional circumstances, it's like your mother always taught you: if a gentleman can't say something once, he shouldn't say anything at all.











FORMAT: **GC, PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **LIONHEAD** ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **Q4 (PC), 2006 (CONSOLES)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E151**

The Movies

Hollywood strategy sim or machinima sandbox? Lionhead's latest production sets out to be both







The 8,000 stock scenes available in the Advanced Movie Maker mode allow for a broad range of genres including sci-fi (above), westerns, horror, etc. You can also select from a range of musical soundtracks



Three years after Peter Molyneux first began evangelising *The Movies* as his latest epic escapade, the game is finally nearing completion. With the beta deadline looming, this appears to be one occasion where the initial ambitions have grown rather than – as with *Black & White* – diminished as reality took hold. At first, the plan was for players to create movie trailers; now they can direct entire productions. And while *Black & White* was a complex and esoteric experience, *The Movies* is Molyneux's shot at the mainstream. It is, in effect, his *Sims*.

Very specifically, this is a simulation of the Hollywood film industry. You begin as an unknown studio owner in the early '20s and then make your way through movie history, hiring talented actors, screenwriters and crew, researching new technologies like colour film and CGI, and, most importantly, making profitable movies. Beneath the glamour lies the micromanagement element – players must construct and maintain an attractive, efficient lot, building canteens, trailers and production studios, toilets, roads and gardens, all maintained by a cast of janitors and workmen. Whatever you do takes time and money – the familiar balance of the strategy simulation.

What players won't find is the usual cavalcade of menu screens and submenu windows. Instead the studio lot itself is one vast graphical menu system, each building representing a facet of the gameplay – the casting room, the script office, the stage school, etc. Drawing inspiration from *Black & White*, the player controls the action via a hand icon that grabs and drops items into functional areas. Want to write a screenplay? Simply take hold of a writer, carry him over to the script building and drop him inside. Feel that a leading actress is letting her figure go? Pick her up from the burger van and deposit her in the gym, or more drastically, the plastic surgery department for a little nip and tuck. It's an amusing and immediate interface, designed to keep the player involved in the raw action; it's also a guiding philosophy behind all of Lionhead's current output.

Of course, the movies themselves provide the key focus of the game and here, players get to have as much or as little control as they wish. If a writer is given a genre and shoved in front of a typewriter he will bash out a script automatically. Tell him to make a five-star film and he'll produce an epic with a cast of thousands; opt for a one-star picture and it'll be a cheapy with a single set and two actors. Whatever you go for, the game contains 8,000 stock scene types – chases, phone conversations, fights, love-ins, etc. The AI will pick a selection of these, and drop in your studio's actors. Job done.

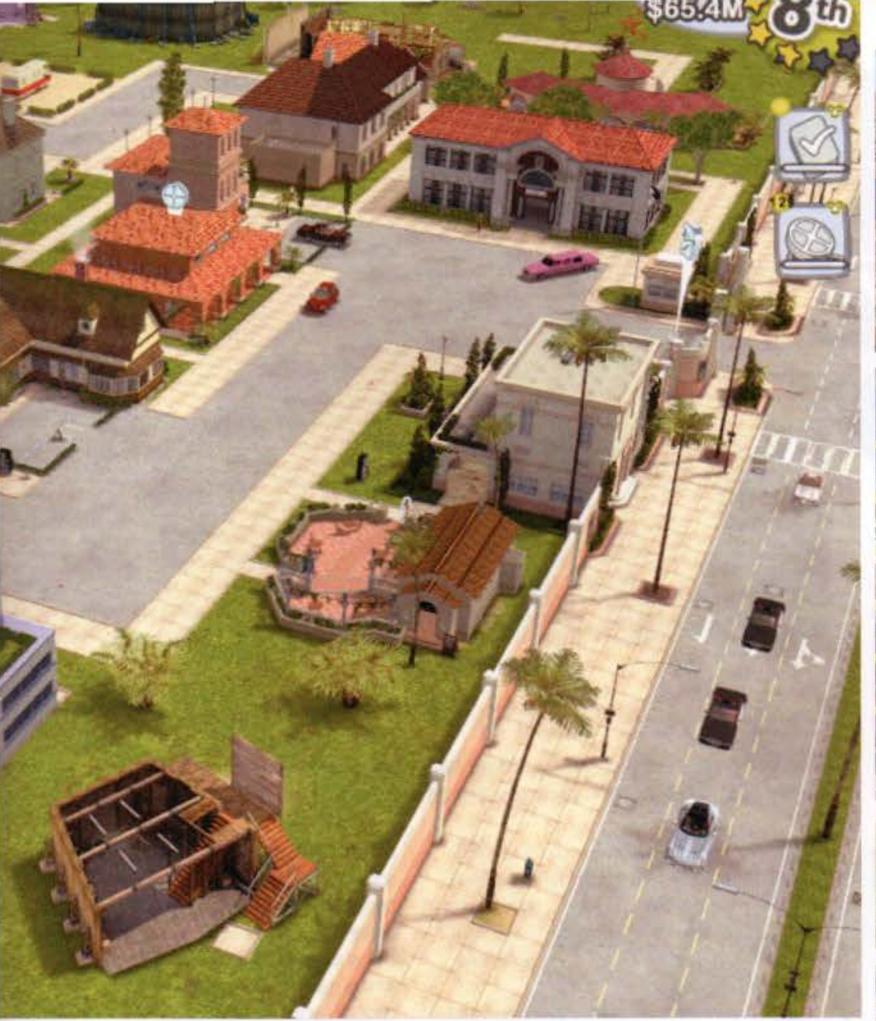
Players who want more of a creative role can enter the Advanced Movie Maker mode

Feel that a leading actress is letting her figure go? Pick her up from the burger van and deposit her in the gym, or the plastic surgery department for a little nip and tuck



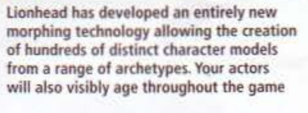
Each set provides a number of locations that can be re-used. Your audience will begin to notice if you overdo it, however











Lionhead has developed an entirely new morphing technology allowing the creation of hundreds of distinct character models from a range of archetypes. Your actors will also visibly age throughout the game

where it's possible to intricately modify the completed movie. The scenes are represented by a row of screenshots which can be clicked on to play the selected sequence. A range of manipulation icons then allow you to flick through a vast selection of alternative costumes, make-up styles, locations, even weather effects (so long as your studio has discovered the correct technology – rain machines arrive in the '30s, while dry ice may not be accessible until the '50s), allowing you to individualise the product. More than 40 different sets are available, each offering dozens of locations, plus Lionhead's costume designer reckons there are enough contrasting outfits, hairstyles, and accessories to create ten million combinations.

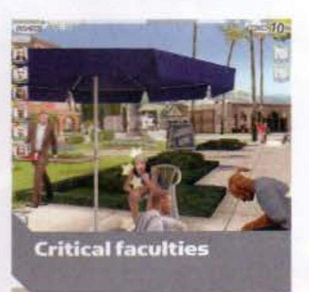
What the system doesn't provide is intricate control over the exact placing of the cameras, or the choreography of the action. Instead, players make subtle alterations using a series of slider controls. These will, say, pan the camera in and out of a scene, or change the emotional subtext, graduating from happy to sad, from a minor slap-fight to a violent punch-up. Again the casual gamer is at the forefront of Lionhead's thinking here. However, there are some fascinating technologies available to the more ambitious user. It's possible to add subtitles to each scene, or to plug in a mic and provide dialogue – Lionhead's own lip-synching technology ensures the actors mimic your words to noticeable effect. There's even a Star Maker facility that allows players to input their own photo portraits and map them on to in-game characters.

Underneath it all, *The Movies* unapologetically presents a populist vision of the Hollywood system. You won't be dealing with the arcane intricacies of filmmaking ("I still don't know what a dolly grip is," studio head **Mark Webber** cheerfully admits as he demos the game) – this is showbiz as seen through the bulging eyes of gossip mags and satellite entertainment shows. And yet despite angling for the Heat demographic, the game's closest relative might be *Championship Manager*. Instead of players there is a roster of actors, who must be trained and properly cared for if they are to perform well (and often the best performers are the most troubled and temperamental). The movies themselves are the equivalent of *CM*'s matches – telling public manifestations of behind-the-scenes tactics. The addictive cycle of preparation, action and reward seems almost identical. *The Movies*, too, is aiming to generate an active community. Players will be able to save out films as WMV files and upload them to a dedicated site. Lionhead will rank the most popular efforts – a simulacrum of the real industry.



Your movie stars are listed as icons down the left of the screen, and clicking on these allow you to locate any errant actors immediately. Thought bubbles provide useful clues as to each actor's thoughts and feelings

The Movies is a rather odd prospect. In ways it harks back to Bullfrog's *Theme...* titles – cute social simulations inhabited by cartoon characters. In others, however, it is a terribly modern game – ambitious, packed with proprietary technologies, one eye on the vital online audience. Is this a recipe for mainstream success? 'Nobody knows anything' wrote William Goldman in his movie industry expose Adventures In The Screen Trade. We reservedly agree, especially where Lionhead is concerned.



Critical faculties

When each movie is released the game generates review pages from fictitious magazines, and these provide hints on where you're going right or wrong. Apparently, dozens of interconnected factors govern the success of a movie: the chemistry between the lead actors, their performances, the quality of the sets, etc. Interestingly, as the years go by, the game informs you of real-world events – earthquakes, wars, fashions, etc – so it's possible to release related movies at just the right moment, perhaps putting out a sci-fi flick after Neil Armstrong's moon walk or catching the hippie vibe by dressing actors in love beads and flares.



FORMAT: **PC, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **CROTEAM**
ORIGIN: **CROATIA**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**

Serious Sam II

The tongue-in-cheek series that married fire-and-forget with point-and-click returns for another fragging of the 5,000

There's no secret to *Serious Sam*'s FPS formula. In fact, its obvious nature is the essence of the series' appeal, and its recipe is more like a simple two-line BASIC program than anything else: 1. Take dozens of aggressive enemies. 2. That's it.

After defending Earth from the deranged alien Mental, Sam has been transported to the planet Sirius, of course, and is charged with saving the galaxy, naturally, by collecting fragments of a medallion while once again taking a big, blunt stick to Mental's loopy hordes. But none of that really matters – the plots of the *Serious Sam* games have always been joyously hollow, a front for some surreal humour and a thin excuse for throwing intense numbers of enemies at the player. Initial game details, however, cause some slight concerns about *Serious Sam II* becoming like other games: enemies now arrive by dropship in order to avoid them being teleported from all angles, and each of the game's seven regions – which are broken up into a total of 40 levels – feature an indigenous race of NPCs that will need to be rescued or aided in return for rewards. Such thoughts soon seem churlish, though, as a demo of the game's early stages bursts forth with streams of opponents that dispel any notions of Sam trying to settle down into something preoccupied with objectives and rigid set-pieces.

At first, *Serious Sam II*'s environments feel not too distant from those of past *Sam* games, but again such tensions soon dissolve as a number of pleasingly gimmicky stages begin to emerge from within the jungle/swamp/canyon/Oriental themes. One sees Sam shrunken to Lilliputian size and dropped into a giant junkyard, where blades of grass loom like droopy lampposts and the level begins inside a green bottle. Another has the player taking part in a death-row gameshow, with Sam needing to reach checkpoints within a time limit to prevent his head from exploding. And still there are plenty of fresh-feeling places to visit, such as a trip to the scorched home planet of the Kleer Skeletons, a visit to Siriusopolis, a glittering metropolis filled with perfectly bleached buildings and elevated monorail tracks.

The plots of the Serious Sam games have always been joyously hollow, a front for surreal humour and an excuse for throwing intense numbers of enemies at the player



Though not confirmed as a definite feature, *Serious Sam II* gives the player extra lives, as seen in the Xbox conversion of the original. Hopefully, the combo-based scoring of *Next Encounter* will make it into the game, tempting players to dash straight from one wave of enemies to another







The obligatory physics aspect is evidenced by Sam's new ability to grab and move certain props in order to create makeshift barriers or platforms for accessing new areas. The Serious Strength pickup will allow him to fling carts, logs and even the bodies of enemies over silly distances



The walkways of Frostpost promise gun battles of a more interesting nature than the corridor/flatland combinations of past games. This stage also requires Sam to head indoors periodically in order to avoid hypothermia; whether this will turn into an unnecessary annoyance or a setup for frantic, claustrophobic ambushes is to be seen



These crones come in two strains: tricky, fast-moving fliers who attack from the skies, and ground-based cauldron-stirrers that spawn irritating grunts. The dual Uzis aren't a far cry from those seen in *Next Encounter*, while Sam's chainsaw has been replaced by a circular saw that can fire its blades



As in previous *Sam* games, the weapons don't require reloading. As well as an unconventional double-barrelled shotgun/blunderbuss combo, an auto shotgun with a rotating ammo chamber is available and provides near-continuous fire. Grenades are a permanent secondary fire option, too

A typically lurid and nonsensical range of enemy types feature, totalling 45 in all, some old, some new and some reinvented, with Croteam hoping for a head count of up to 50 opponents onscreen at once. The terrifying headless bombers return, but not exactly – they now have freaky heads in the form of swollen bombs set atop a neck made of springs. Fat clowns travel on unicycles while brandishing a dynamite-ridden cake in each hand, and zombie quarterbacks fling explosive pigskins. Airborne enemies now tote blunderbusses, and one particularly violent adversary comes in the form of a tank-like demon with rocket launchers for fists, a mixture of *Doom*'s Cyberdemon and *Smash TV*'s Mutoid man. A variant of the Werebull – the stampeding nuisance that engaged the player in numerous games of chicken as they fired into its face before sidestepping its brutal charge at the last half-second – comes in the form of a scampering clockwork rhino, complete with a giant key protruding from its back.

And bosses are mooted to be towering monsters that'll dwarf the stupidly huge colossus that appeared in the great pyramids of the original.

The new weapon set – 15 guns wide – holds few surprises, and sees the Serious Bomb receiving a funky makeover. Sam's ludicrous cannon fires balls of greater size, and there's one colourful addition to the arsenal in the form of the Klodovik Bird, a parrot-like creature that homes in on targeted enemies while dropping bombs. Ten vehicles will be available, building significantly on those lightly touched upon by Climax's *Next Encounter* on PS2/GC: aggressive relatives of Star Wars' own pod racer, hovercraft, three-wheeled speeders, Sam's signature surfboard and even spiked rollerballs, glorious melee spheres used to crash through foes. And it's not just vehicles; Sam also gets to ride animals, although details of these are still to be revealed.

It may sound somewhat like an update-by-numbers, but that's the beauty of *Serious Sam*'s simplicity: to meddle with it too much is to ruin it. Engine, scale and frippery aside, it feels like little is set to seriously change about the game's core, but in the best possible way. It looks set to remain a riotously straightforward game, and one that would become obsolete if anyone ever invented a circle-strafe button.



Autumn of Sam

Croteam is determined that the Xbox conversion will ship along with the PC instalment, minus the level editor, at the end of September. Quite how such an up-to-date piece of tech as the Serious Engine 2 will cope with the downsize to a current-day console remains to be seen, especially given the screen tearing prevalent in the Xbox conversion of the original *Serious Sam/ Second Encounter* pack. If such an ambition wasn't enough, Croteam is planning an Xbox Live coop mode for 'at least' four players, perhaps in answer to the prayers of those FPS fans hungry for the online team-up rumbles that have been part of the wishlist left unfulfilled by many an Xbox shooter.

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **LIONHEAD**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **Q4**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E111, E126, E151**

Black & White 2

A more clearly defined sequel pursues cleanliness for the sake of godliness





Black & White wasn't quite the well-defined experience suggested by its title. The wealth of ideas competing for attention throughout the grand endeavour made for a fractious, often confusing game. With the sequel, Lionhead hopes to cure such ills.

The player's role as deity remains focused on ensuring that their chosen tribe, be that Greek, Roman, Viking or otherwise, achieves dominance of the game's ten lands. Inevitably, there remain two contrasting means by which to win – the way of peace (constructing a city so resplendent that other tribes flock to it) or of war. While Blizzard veteran **Ron Millar** continues work on this latter branch, **Peter Molyneux** is keen to stress the stunning nature of the townships available to the righteous player. "I want cities to be absolutely beautiful," he reveals, "with pubs, shops, bath houses, amphitheatres, OAP homes, etc. If you leave the game running, the people – when not getting drunk in taverns – will begin to customise their environment, placing flower pots in windows and decorating the streets." The names of these citizens, it emerges, won't be input in the usual manner, but derived directly from the contact list of your email client or personal organiser – if there's an idea more inimitably Lionhead than that one, we'll believe it when we see it.

Those who adopt the opposing RTS route will discover that its mechanics have developed into a powerful, flexible means by which to coordinate a war. This, understandably, is also the system for which the game's landscapes have catered. There are clear strategic vantage points such as hills and forests together with areas that are conversely vulnerable. Combat units range from soldiers and archers to catapults and artillery, the evolution of those troops over time (bows and arrows, for example, becoming bows and flaming arrows) also being considered. In terms of magic – still split into everyday and epic varieties – we've seen the latter in action and, yes, the ferocity of the volcano, with its lava coursing through city streets and over their inhabitants, is unquestionable, further upheld by the scorched wasteland that remains afterwards.

Governing all, however, is *Black & White*'s innately simple and intuitive interface. The RTS genre, explains Millar, has become too esoteric. "Lots of games," he continues, "are adding more units and better visuals, but that isn't adding to the gameplay. The way forward in terms of game depth is in simulation and physics, not complex controls." Accordingly, Lionhead has dealt with the engine's increased versatility by simply extending the logical functionality of the player's ethereal hand. Having units scale a wall, for example, simply requires the corresponding platoon flag to be picked up and planted atop it. To combine units, similarly, their flags are placed together, Lionhead claiming to have merged 500 men into a single squad in such a fashion. "It allows you," says Millar, "to develop strategies you never dreamed of."

Though the separate labouring of these two charismatic designers suggests a recipe for more confusion than we had before, Molyneux and Millar's demo reveals a purposeful and entertaining experience emerging from the dichotomy. The two of them, it seems, are well aware that the last thing *Black & White*'s sequel can afford to be is grey.



Different city layouts carry a heightened sense of importance and consequence, densely packed clusters of houses encouraging the spread of illness and discontent



Lionhead wants to up the level of ambient feedback reflective of your status as a god. The hand of a benevolent player will flourish with colourful flora while that of a malicious one will darken and decay. The giant creatures are similarly affected





Beasts and citizens

Perhaps in response to the scatterbrain nature and priorities of the original, the creatures of *Black & White 2* have been reduced in number and, it appears, in significance. There are now only four base species to choose from – cow, wolf, lion and ape – and their evolution is more specific to the purpose for which they're reared. Creatures trained by a warmonger will develop the ability to smash into enemy towns, crushing smaller units both under foot and beneath the chunks of masonry they rend from city walls. Peaceful ones, meanwhile, will bring a familiar blend of charity and performance to the appreciative masses. Unsurprisingly, the AI that drives these beasts to discover new skills and learn through tuition is again being described as cutting-edge.

Kingdom Under Fire: Heroes

Korea's take on fantasy RTS returns in a game where keeping a stiff lower jaw is requisite for becoming a hero



Urukubarr, one of *Kingdom Under Fire's* new heroes, can destroy the deadly giant scorpions with a single combo attack. He is, however, not particularly pleasant to control due to his lumbering gait and lack of speed

FORMAT: **XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **BLUE SIDE**
DEVELOPER: **PHANTAGRAM**
ORIGIN: **KOREA**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER 16**

Cruelly, there's no voice work in place in this update of last year's oddest Xbox Live experience, which rather robs it of the character that made it so special. The cut-scenes retain the cud-chewing facial animations of the protagonists but without those stentorian voices they feel flatter and less engaging. Subtitles scroll beneath the images, however, and judging by the scripting this is going to be every bit as hammy as the original. Let's just hope the Donald Sinden soundalikes have been brought in again.

Familiar characters return including Rupert (surely the most inappropriately named man-at-arms ever), and Walter, though Phantagram has done a *Soul Calibur* by introducing a raft of new characters with unique fighting styles. There are seven in all, most significant among them being Morene, a sour-faced female dark elf with the dress sense of Cruella de Vil and the appendages of Edward Scissorhands.

No leap of imagination is required to work out that each can decimate enemy footsoldiers with differing but equally devastating combos and special moves, though the difficulty increases depending on the character you choose. Select Ellen and you get a fine balance between swift offensive thrusts and stout defensive parries. Rupert, on the other hand, wields a gigantic hammer that takes an age to swing but can take out several enemies if timed correctly.

The original *Kingdom Under Fire's* close-quarters combat felt stodgy and repetitive, and so it proves in this update. Fortunately, the strategic elements that broke up the violence return with several key improvements. Camera control now has greater flexibility and it's noticeable that these battlefields hold thousands more soldiers (around 200 onscreen during any one battle), allowing for more sophisticated decision-making. More variety has been added too and there are many more castle sieges, scouting missions and tactical defences to add to the open skirmishes that overpowered the original.

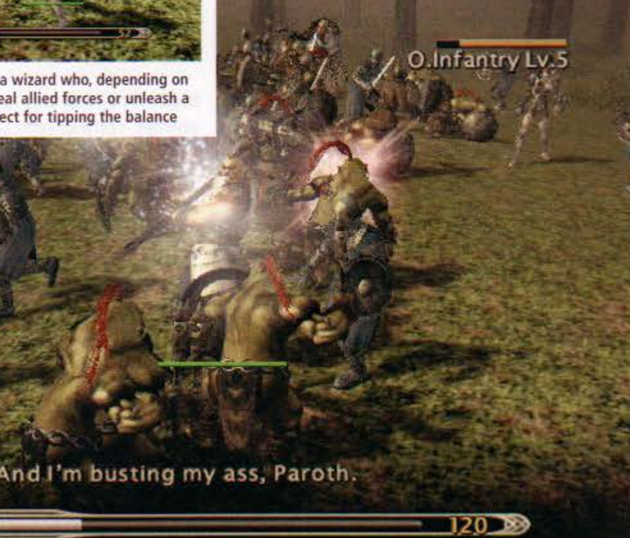
Although many new creatures and features have been added, including swooping aerial attacks from fire-breathing wyverns, the interface and frontend remain on the clunky side. Judging by the few missions available to us it also appears that individual assignments go on for too long without the haven of a save point or two. Also missing from this code is the campaign map, something that was downright ugly and unintuitive in the original. Hopefully it's being replaced with something simple, effective and aesthetically pleasing to the point where troop deployment becomes a joy in itself rather than inscrutable and tedious.

There's not enough game in this preview code to tell if *Heroes* is going to significantly batter the original, but the addition of three fresh Live modes – sixplayer Troop Battle, sixplayer Hero Battle and an anarchic-sounding Invasion Mode – should ensure it retains a healthy following.





The white button summons a wizard who, depending on the character chosen, will heal allied forces or unleash a deadly attack on rivals. Perfect for tipping the balance





With 50 campaign missions, random missions and custom missions, *Heroes* provides a comprehensively weighty package. Hopefully, the variety in these missions will not tail off too soon as with the original



The mini-map can be enhanced by pressing in the left trigger and is an intuitive way to view changing battlefield events without having to pause and go into a new menu. Keeping tabs on your units can be confusing, especially in a brawl



Live hate

Live play in the original could be daunting, but Phantagram promises that newbies will now be eased in with a variety of Optimatch features. It's possible to enter Spectator mode to learn battle strategies as wars rage between other players. Significant moments can also be saved and replayed later. There's nothing quite like getting stuck in, though, and if Live play is not your thing then be consoled by the fact that there's at least 50 hours worth of game in the singleplayer campaign, and it's all accompanied by Korean death-chanting soft rock.

Static shots fail to do the game much justice. It's the project's accurate reproduction of the series' choreography and the capturing of its atmosphere that makes it worth watching





FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **SHINY ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q4**



The Matrix: Path Of Neo

With not so much the game of the film as the game of the films, Shiny is doing all it can not to miss its second opportunity

Two years ago, just as Shiny Entertainment had previously been kicked from its premises as potential publishers fell, so were we all snatched from our humdrum reality of common sense and plunged into the pre-Reloaded Matrix, where Hollywood studios and scribes were twisting what should have been a no-brainer of an adaptation into a deeply illogical and unpleasant fiasco.

Now that the franchise's machinery has all but ground to a halt, the egos have deflated, the pressure has eased and gamers, in the guise of Thomas Anderson, can finally prepare to enter the Matrix series in a manner that doesn't involve running in awkwardly animated strides through its periphery. Having been previously daubed with cover-up and paraded to rake in those easy franchise dollars, today the role of *Enter The Matrix* has been upturned, making it an anathema that encapsulates everything *Path Of Neo* will supposedly avoid.



Though moviegoers have come to expect a performance from Keanu Reeves that's more carved than rehearsed, we hope Shiny can inject some more life into his visage

If this is to be The Matrix Repaired, then Shiny is taking no chances in ensuring that the obligation is fulfilled. The game's product description is peppered with former absentees, reinstated through a mix of conventional and ambitious design that ticks boxes with fanatical enthusiasm. Every major action sequence from the movie trilogy will feature, mostly in thirdperson but with on-rails interludes. Much of the original cast is also reconvening to lend likenesses and vocal talents, the in-game character models shaping up nicely, if still a little rough round the edges. Somewhat inevitably, the Wachowski brothers are again taking the opportunity to embellish their creation as it's revisited, but this time in the more productive forms of a revised ending (fans rejoice) and newly devised tutorial 'programs'. These early levels take a satisfying step outside of what you'd expect, plundering classic eastern cinema for references, decorations and themes to surround Neo as he schools himself in the very modern art of gunkata.

Early code says many positive things about how Shiny has attempted, second time around, to capture that aesthetic art of fighting. Like *Devil May Cry*, attack in *Path Of Neo* is as much about orchestration as it is technique, about directing extravagant snippets of action cinema for yourself and those around you while you play. We can confirm that this new approach mixes gunplay, melee and manoeuvre with vastly greater success than last time, layering atop its already comprehensive move-set additional suites of 'focus' moves (including bullet-time, wall-runs and throws), flight abilities, context-sensitive combos and disarms. Though Atari's claim regarding 10,000 available attacks is something we'll believe when we've counted every last one, the similarly outlandish suggestion of a brawl that escalates into a screen-swelling riot of AI-driven Smiths has tantalising evidence there to support it.

Only the full game can answer the most important questions. Will the combat balance button-bashing with technique? Will it evolve throughout or fade with repetition? For now, what's uplifting is that *Path Of Neo* is a game less concerned with that most self-indulgent question of 'what is the Matrix?' and more with the affirmation that 'this is the Matrix', keen to prove that there's still a reason to jack in.





The second film's outstanding CG set-piece, known as the Burly Brawl, sets Shiny an enormous technical challenge, but also provides the opportunity for a killer showcase



Gun lobby

The big seller of the game's early code is its recreation of the lobby scene from the first Matrix movie. Though it's unfortunate that the Propellerheads' backing track, Spybreak!, will likely not feature, the degree to which the scene has been realised is otherwise sure to please. Together with an AI-controlled Trinity, Neo dispatches the hordes of Metacortech troops with a range of moves that, in this small dose, never feels repetitious. He cartwheels and dives between pillars as they explode into the requisite shower of particles, methodically snapping weapons from his opponents' hands before confounding them with all manner of focus-modified attacks. If the full game can keep this onslaught fresh throughout, then its atonement for 2003's effort will be complete.

Okami

Breathtaking enough in still screenshots, on the move Okami marks out new territory for gaming



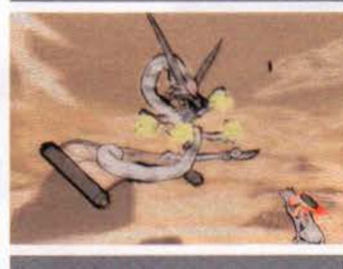


FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **CLOVER STUDIO**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBA**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E137, E151**



Gusts of wind and ripples of water – things games have tradionally struggled to represent elegantly – fit perfectly into *Okami's* visual style, feeling real without looking realistic







The NPCs Amaterasu meets add a touch of RPG normality to the game's innovative mechanics: the favours and chores they ask for help with form a conventional framework

Momentum is one of the most seductive sensations gaming has to offer – building up speed, carrying weight, skidding to a stop all add immeasurably to the impression of being physically connected to the game. In *Okami*, this is taken one step further: momentum isn't something you can feel, it's something you can see.

The game's landmark visuals are still as startling as ever, but it's not until you play *Okami* that their true effect becomes plain. The world pulses with life, colour and light, making even the humblest rock or post worthy of a quick, sightseeing pause. Indeed, an early impression is that the game is distractingly – almost tiringly – pretty, exhausting your eye muscles as they flick from one vibrant detail to another. The urge this gives you to explore is compounded by that incredible sense of momentum. Amaterasu, the game's magnificent wolf heroine, seems to accelerate endlessly as she runs, stretching from a gentle trot to a headlong lope. As she does, her feet tear a streak of grass, then a sprinkling of flowers and finally a showering plume of petals from whatever she's running across. It's narcotically beautiful, but often means you overshoot your target by hundreds of yards, hypnotised by the sense of speed and spectacle.

What sits under this cloak of many, many colours is a fairly traditional action adventure. Amaterasu explores a world, solving puzzles and defeating enemies. The former usually hinges on using her tail as a magical paintbrush. Holding R1 drops the world into sepia tones, freezing the action but still allowing control of the camera. From this view you use the analogue stick to paint graceful brush-strokes over the scene – perhaps adding a sword to the hand of an ancient statue, drawing in the sun to bring light to the unnatural night which has fallen over Amaterasu's land, or slicing a line through an enemy in order to defeat them. The recognition of these strokes is fairly forgiving, so there's little anxiety over precision. As the game progresses, Amaterasu will gain control over more brush powers, which will allow more sophisticated interaction with the world.

With so much of the game still to be completed it's impossible to judge how close the gameplay will come to matching the visuals' achievements. Early puzzles are rudimentary, requiring little more than a join-the-dots mentality. Combat is satisfying, but it's hard to know if it can add depth without causing confusion or awkwardness. But in smooth, staggering motion, *Okami* is already a crucially important title, showing that games can reach outside their traditional aesthetics with captivating results.



Combat (top) adds a sinister tinge to the game's tone, and Amaterasu's physical attacks have all the desperate violence of a mother wolf protecting her cubs



Puppy love

Despite her considerable skills as a calligrapher, Amaterasu is still first a foremost a wolf – a fierce, wild animal – and the game reflects this. Before finishing enemies with an elegant stroke of her tail, she can ram them with the shield she carries on her back – a fast-moving, rough-and-tumble contrast to the game's other mechanic. She can also dig in promising spots for secrets, sending up fountains of dirt as she does. *Okami* could hardly be aesthetically more distant from the cute stylings of *Nintendogs*, but both have the excellence of their animation to thank for how well they convey the impulsive, animal grace of their stars.



One of *Legends*' early career races is a Mini adventure, easing in gamers unfamiliar with or daunted by simulation racers with the snappy turns and resilience of the Cooper S

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **10TACLE**
DEVELOPER: **SIMBIN**
ORIGIN: **GERMANY**
RELEASE: **WINTER 2005**

GT Legends

Simbin is on a slide with its latest sim, drifting across to the enthusiast racing of '60s and '70s classics

Thanks to singular dedication and adept execution, the question of precisely who would enjoy *GTR* revolved almost solely around a gamer's love of simulation racing. By design, that isn't quite true of *GT Legends* – a successor that has its eye not only on the auto-fetishist with a passion for bygone motors but on the casual driver open to eccentric handling models yet shy of their aggressive demands.

Though we have persistent qualms about its garish frontend and technical requirements (one night-set race is demonstrated that, in the current build, noticeably chugs), there's no substantial evidence to suggest that Simbin has lost its vital commitment to authenticity. With support from the different arms of the FIA Historic Racing tour, the game's 28 car models, said to extend to 90 different iterations, are fanatically realised. If you have an image in mind of just what that entails, it may need adjustment. Exhaust pipes belch smoke according to a dedicated physics model while the chassis, and therefore cockpit views, of every car rock distinctively as the pedal goes down. The developer is enormously proud of its engine noises (they all are nowadays), captured with full flavour from each individual machine under race conditions. Interior texturing, noted in *GTR* for its gleaming cleanliness, has been appropriately weathered, mirrors now lined with dirt and metalwork scoured and scarred.

It'll take a more substantial playtest to determine how well the game's system of vehicle maturation works over time, the same being true of its five-tier difficulty heirachy. Though vehicles range from toy-like Minis to dominating Ford Mustangs, the team insists that any car, once purchased, can remain competitive throughout. The usual aids are in place, together with a clutch-assist to facilitate the shifting of gears without requisite pedal work. Generally, the learning curve has decreased since *GTR*, the overall dynamic having moved away from the tuning of cars towards their simple acquisition and gradual mastery.

When sampling these different vehicles, the degree to which they each deviate from the conventions of modern engineering proves enlightening, even if our own fanaticism is inadequate for judging their very finest accuracy. We can tell you, however, that when back-ends swing out in *Legends*, the instinctive urge to correct isn't always the most productive, the emphasis very much pushed towards holding a drift together until the last. Arcade racing, you could say, through the back door.

The simulation hardcore may have something to say about this deviation from *GTR*'s original course, but if *Legends* maintains its slide and thereby gives the genre something fresh, the least we can give in return is kudos.



The game's 11 venues are as immaculate as CAD-assisted reconstructions could be, though again their pristine clarity seems to preclude a certain degree of charm that console gamers can almost take for granted. They may not stir the imagination, but the intricate contours of each track certainly send shockwaves through the wheel

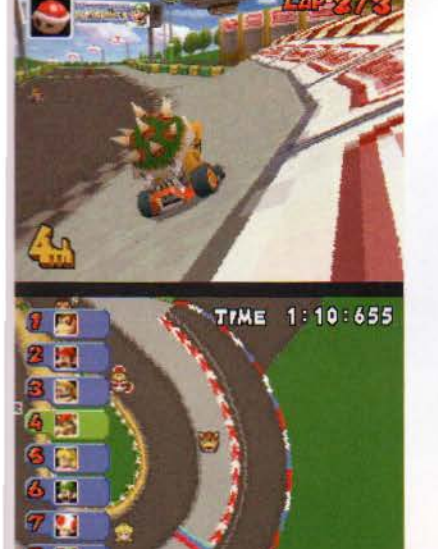


One of the game's nods to its more vocal fans is the fulfilment of their desire for animated hands and feet on wheel and pedals, as well as depicted gear changes

A day at the races

Together with its new DirectX 9 graphics engine, *GT Legends* has interestingly pursued the 24hr realtime lighting system yearned for by fans of *GTR*. Gradient shadows and surface textures adapt to the passing day, cars also featuring their own faithfully formed headlights and illuminated dashboards. The passage of time can be accelerated to create races that more quickly experience the transition between light and dark, while endurance races are available to further exploit the potential. Fortunately, a limited save option is available for those with a business/social life rude enough to interfere.

At this juncture, however, we can only hope that the apparent performance hit inflicted by the new lighting can be minimised prior to release.



The lower screen shows a zoomed-in view, which can be a useful indicator of what's going on behind you, including giving you vital fair warning of incoming shells



Unlike *Mario Kart 64*, the DS version is in full 3D, fleshing out racers as well as giving tracks camber and elevation. It's plain, colourful, busy and fast – just as it should be

Mario Kart DS

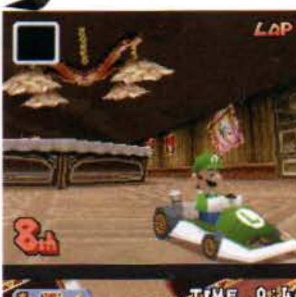
Nintendo does the maths: eight players plus a classic style equals the sum of Mario Kart fans' desires

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E151**

Another chance to sample the pleasures of *Mario Kart DS*, away from the clamour of E3's showfloor, ought to have presented an opportunity for a more reflective, studied examination of the game's handling nuances and track design. It did, but in practice it was much more important that there was no one else waiting to jostle you off the demo pod, giving you the freedom to have another race... and another. And another. And then a few more.

Double Dash may have been the first instalment in the knockabout racing series to support more than four players, but this latest version brings eight together in heated competition in a style much more likely to please franchise purists. It's best described as a halfway house between the game's 16- and 64bit incarnations, boasting the taut digital handling of *Super Mario Kart* – although the trademark hop-induced slide doesn't bite the tarmac quite as hard – and the broader, longer, more eventful but less technically challenging track design of *Mario Kart 64*. Even though some of the original game's circuits make a very welcome comeback (along with other series favourites, *Mario Kart DS* following the current vogue for racing game greatest hits), they seem to have been widened to accommodate and encourage multiplied multiplayer chaos. A shame for time-trial addicts, perhaps, but the moment you take out three rivals racing abreast with the new wide-blast bomb pick-up, you'll mind the track's girth a great deal less.

The races are brief and the track crowded enough to guarantee close finishes, even with the magnificently irritating AI drivers filling most of the slots, and revenge is never more than a button-press and a minute's wait away. As a singleplayer game, *Mario Kart DS* is unlikely to outshine its brilliant SNES ancestor, and its success online depends on how well Nintendo's infrastructure comes together, but all the signs are that this will be fixture when DSes come together for years to come.





While the scale of the courses is clearly inspired by the design of *Mario Kart 64*, the handling has the tighter, neater feel of the SNES original. It may be perfect for multiplayer battles, but the singleplayer game could suffer a little

Chibi Robo

Skip's tiny domestic automaton reveals his secret weapon: cosplay

FORMAT: **GC**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **SKIP**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **JUNE**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E144, E151**



Bold primary colours, an adorable hero of tiny size and the mother of all tidying-up jobs to do. We've been here before, but Skip's thin tin man doesn't get quite so carried away by his task as *Katamari*'s Prince. Chibi Robo goes about his chores as he finds them, painstakingly, one at a time and with everybody's happiness on his mind, not their mass.

At its most menial, the route to a harmonious household is by disposing of rubbish, scrubbing away at stains with a toothbrush, or feeding cookie crumbs to hungry fish. Robo's tools, along with all items, are stored in his amazingly capacious head and selected from a circular menu system with a flick of the stick (according to current Nintendo fashion, since *Zelda: Twilight Princess* also renovates its clumsy inventory in this way). They include helicopter blades for gliding, a teacup that serves as an even quainter reprise of Solid Snake's cardboard box and a popgun for dealing with parasitic mechanical spiders.

True happiness is more then just cleanliness, however, and Robo will need to communicate with his owners and other strange, toylike occupants of the house by dressing up in achingly cute costumes (such as frog, patient or superhero) designed to appeal to their natures. There are indications of a touching, everyday side to the surreal story – father has been banished to sleep on the couch because mother is 'mad all the time' – while a short day/night cycle brings intriguing changes to Robo's environment that could deepen the puzzles significantly.

Even with its full-movement Nintendo makeover, *Chibi Robo* is a very simplistic and leisurely experience, with slightly sluggish controls and without the immediate freedom to clamber and explore all that looming furniture as much as you'd like to. But if its domestic world opens up, and later tasks prove as elaborate and involving as that gorgeous animation, it might yet be the perfect distraction from actually doing the tidying up.



The outside world can be a perilous place for Robo – although you would never guess it from his endlessly chipper gait. But even if mechanical spiders don't get him, he still needs to keep an eye on his battery power

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **DIGITAL JESTERS**
DEVELOPER: **KYLOTONN**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**

Bet On Soldier

A leftfield FPS which puts its money – and its name – where its mouth is



Performance review

***Bet On Soldier*'s bosses are designed to bring some of the grandeur of Japanese action-game set-pieces to the FPS. Each boss will have unique powers and a unique weakpoint – say, breathing apparatus on his back which can be shot off for an instant kill – and finding the latter will be crucial for getting the maximum cash from the encounter. Although an initial short cinematic will try to provide hints as to possible strategies for a quick takedown, it's not yet clear if trying to present this kind of boss battle in a tightly timed framework will be successful.**



It's widely recognised that it's not easy for games with new ideas to communicate them to the market. As such it's almost possible to hear Kylotonn's grim desperation in its choice of game title. The developer wants you to know it's a game where you bet on soldiers. Got that? You *bet* on soldiers. You bet on *soldiers*. If you buy this game, you will be betting on soldiers.

In truth, however, the game's neat USP isn't what has the biggest effect on the gameplay. Set in a future where multinational corporations have realised that the profitability of war means that peace is a risk they can't afford, *Bet On Soldier* puts you in the shoes of a recruit facing a corporate, monetised, televised battleground. Your access to health and ammo isn't rationed by what pick-ups you can find, but by the depth of your pockets. You get paid by the kill – the more skilful, the higher the reward – but this only covers your bread-and-butter income. For the big bucks you need to take on the big bosses, which will trigger a Running Man-style TV segment which filters out the rest of your enemies while you focus on making a quick kill and maximising your bonus. At the start of each level you get to choose the toughness of those bosses, which is where the betting comes in. It's risk/reward laid bare.

However, for all this subtext, the basic combat of the game has a familiar flavour – this is good, old-fashioned war, after all, so the main action, whether single- or multiplayer, is leading sorties into enemy territory, taking out entrenched positions and snipers, and searching out explosive supplies and new vantage points. The unfamiliar feeling comes from the rhythm of the combat: since ammo and substantial armour upgrades can only be bought from the re-supply machines that dot each level, one-on-one combat is often a head-on war of attrition. While it's profoundly satisfying to see your shots pry off one thick plate of armour after the other, it changes the combat dynamic from skilled shooting and clever manoeuvring to a process of standing your ground, gritting your teeth and not stopping firing till the other man drops.

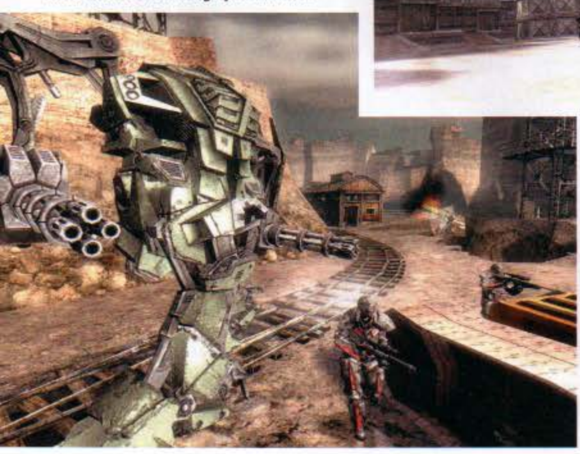


Face-to-face battles initially feel liberatingly gung-ho, but it's not clear how quickly they'll pall. Even headshots won't necessarily speed things up: more heavily-armoured enemies will need to have their helmets chipped off first

Initially, this feels like the antidote to many current, less forgiving, wargames, but there's a strong suspicion that its appeal will fade as the game goes on. There's also the worry that the boss-fight set-pieces have been misjudged – only a minute or two long (with your cash ticking down every second) and dependent on finding weakspots (see 'Performance review'), it seems all too likely that they'll frustrate rather than inspire.

There's still promise here – combat is certainly punchy and multiplayer has some real potential, since finding and securing the recharge stations will add a tactical element to the brutal gunplay, but the game's real gamble will be in proving the long-term merit of its combat dynamic.

Taking out the game's heftier adversaries may require a trip back to the supply station to invest in some heavier weaponry, but watching them crumple in defeat makes the investment feel thoroughly worthwhile





FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **FROM SOFTWARE**
DEVELOPER: **K2**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **JULY 28 (JAPAN)**

Tenchu: Shinobi Taizen

Having leapt from one platform to another, From's latest acquisition still can't evade its past


The meticulous set-up and enactment of dramatic stealth executions remains the series' strength as it darts over to PSP






The game's level-design tool will allow players to truly become the architects of their opponents' demise. Hopefully, network sharing will maximise its potential



How cinematically apt could a predicament be? Having acquired the *Tenchu* licence from Activision, From Software's upcoming attempt to bring the latest episode to PSP has unwittingly scheduled a clash of daggers with *Shinobido: Imashime* (*Way Of The Ninja: The Admonition*) – a new but very familiar stealth experience from original *Tenchu* developer Acquire. For this contest, however, luck has apparently sided with the brand, *Shinobi Taizen* set to infiltrate stores with time to spare before its genetic twin leaps furtively from the shadows.

Tenchu should offer a smooth transition for those schooled in its established arts, returning characters such as Rikimaru, Rin, Onikage and Ayame exhibiting the same penchants for rooftop agility, underwater aerobics and grappling as before. Its recognisable combat system revolves around contextual attacks that respond to the angle and environment between assailant and victim. Accordingly, the game's missions will focus on the series' trademark assassinations – the Ninsatsu and Ninsatsu Ranbu – targeting individuals and groups, respectively.

Beyond the basic singleplayer Scenario mode (a four-way narrative sequel to *Tenchu: Wrath Of Heaven*), those at either end of a multiplayer link will enjoy versus and cooperative gameplay, sharing (if they choose) the products of a level-design tool that again draws parallels with the looming efforts of Acquire. While *Shinobido* features a confirmed interface between its PSP and PS2 iterations, however, such connectivity is unlikely to be touted by the currently singleformat *Shinobi Taizen*.

With the two titles so artistically entwined and prowling near-identical grounds, it's hard to imagine both profiting from their inevitable exchange. Until we see more, it'll prove doubly hard to predict which of them will stand and which will fall.

Without Warning

Circle Studio works overtime to produce the world's first appealing 12-hour shift


Another aspect of the game that might benefit from some tweaking is the interface, which is elegant but somewhat unreadable in the heat of battle

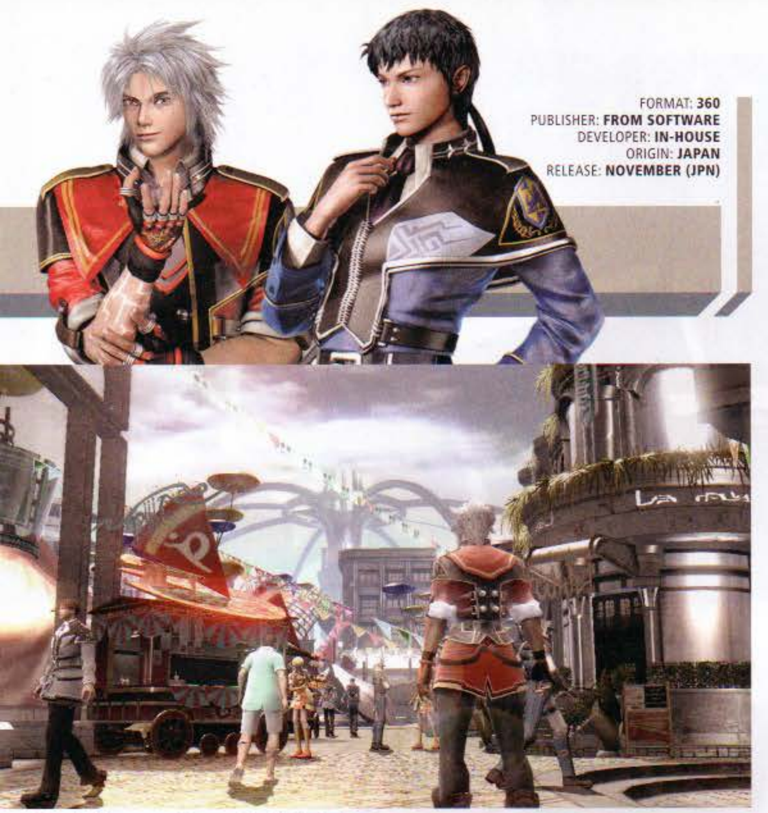
FORMAT: **PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **CIRCLE STUDIO**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**



At a time when so many UK studio closures are being reported, it's a reassuring sign to see a local start-up gain the support of a major Japanese publisher like Capcom. It's easy to see why it was attracted to the project – its central premise remains as appealing as ever. Set over the 12 hours of a terrorist attack on a chemical plant, players will take on the role of six different characters – security guards, special forces, journalists – and fight off the attack through a mix of gunplay, puzzles and tense bomb-diffusing minigames. As you play as each character, you'll see flashes of what's happening to the others – spotting an explosion you earlier set up, or hearing the rattle of a gunfight you'll later take part in.

It's a unique proposition, and one which steps away from merely apeing action movies rather than using gaming's strengths to find new ways of telling stories. As things stand, however, the execution needs some substantial work to be ready for a release only a few months away. The idea of providing a thirdperson adventure with the high-precision combat of an FPS is an admirable goal, but one which the control scheme doesn't yet deliver. The game uses the analogue sensitivity of the PS2's shoulder buttons to allow you to hold the button halfway in to adopt a shooting stance – pulling the camera in to give a more traditional twin-stick FPS feel; pressing the button all the way down lets you fire. While perfect for spraying long bursts of automatic fire at hapless enemies, the lack of sensitivity on the button makes firing short bursts or single shots enormously frustrating – it's all too easy to pop out of firing stance and lose a precious half-second as you return to it. It's a system which will no doubt work much better on the Xbox's triggers, but seems an unfortunate choice on PS2. The lockpicking and bomb-diffusing minigames are also clumsy and poorly presented, although these will presumably be one of the more straightforward areas of the game to polish.

As things stand, *Without Warning* isn't yet displaying the promise Capcom clearly saw in it – but with a revised control system, and perhaps a more generous timetable, it could yet prove its worth.



FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **FROM SOFTWARE**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER (JPN)**

Em Enchant Arm

With a vast world to construct, it's no wonder that From is finding little time paint the town red

While From Software surely saw the irony in not receiving an invite to Microsoft's disastrous Japanese 360 announcement party, the underlying fact remains that while messrs Mizuguchi, Okamoto and Sakaguchi evangelised their respective projects to the media, From – one of the precious few Japanese developers to actively support the original Xbox – could only look on while work on its own 360 launch title continued.

Even excluding the Xbox association, *Enchant Arm* is a twofold rarity – not only an RPG launch title, but one from a developer thus far unaccustomed to the genre. Its story follows Atsuma, a student in the art of 'Enchant' – an alchemy that continues to forge and develop the indigenous human civilisation, also fashioning its primary workforce: giant creatures known as Golems. By manipulating its building blocks of Etel and Materials, players can explore the many branches the magic system has to offer.

Enchant Arm's early screenshots already suggest a world populated by characters that share its own high level of enigmatic visual detail. From is keen to point out that each of these characters' dialogue dubs is being meticulously tied to the animation of their lips and gestures. While each of the game's vast cities must be traversed by foot, its interface and systems are subject to an ongoing streamlining process, devised to ensure that the more pedestrian frills of the JRPG don't scupper the accessibility of this evidently grand piece of work.

With luck, From's gallantry in bringing such an ambitious project to 360 at such an early juncture will translate into a game worthy of its efforts.

From's achievements in squeezing the look of *Otogi 2* from current-generation hardware bodes extremely well for its performance in the next. There's little reason to believe that a metropolis in *Enchant Arm* won't be fully explorable and faithful to the above image





There's a visual opulence to *Enchant Arm* that, for once, gives us cause to celebrate the upcoming hardware generation without questioning its artistic integrity



FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **FROM SOFTWARE**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **AUGUST (JPN)**

Armored Core: Last Raven

From's mech assembly reaches its tenth iteration, the latest configuration of parts boasting some timely new additions

With 1.8 million purchased copies serving as a testament to *Armored Core*'s unabated success, *Last Raven* – the series' tenth proper instalment – marks an event that From is keen to celebrate, this time ringing in some substantial changes for its ever-loyal supporters.

Behind a new level structure lies the premise that Mirage, Kisaragi and Crest – the mech industry's major players – have allied themselves and unsurprisingly used their combined strengths to dominate the globe. Even less surprisingly, a splinter group named Vertex is promptly born of this regime, its bid to bring about revolution set to begin with a declaration of war 24 hours after the game's opening. This storyline – illustrated throughout by CG cut-scenes – together with its imposed timeframe should ensure a more intense overall scenario than players are accustomed to, while still finding space for more than 70 missions spanning over 80 maps, environments accordingly passing from day into night.

Last Raven's customisation suite adds 20 parts to *Nine Breaker*'s existing catalogue, bringing the total to over 500. As expected, players can try out their mech configurations via an arena mode, employing five AC test scenarios to further inform their choice. More than 20 enemy personalities are featured, each carrying a price on their head which is collectable by the triumphant player. As each side's roster becomes progressively listed as KIA, so the course of the game's campaign is altered, often adding to the backdrop which accompanies the player's actions elsewhere.

With iLink support (sadly unavailable on the latest PS2 models) for up to four players and the availability of splitscreen versus battles, *Last Raven* is unlikely to put a permanent end to From's habit of falling over itself to announce one new *AC* instalment after another. As a milestone, however, it promises to stand noticeably taller than the series' recent efforts.





Although mech design should be a careful numbers game, which matches their overall abilities with your style of play, there's still some room for indulgent flamboyance





***Last Raven*'s sweeping, complex story means that briefings are likely to be packed with information, both on the environments that will form your battlefields and on the enemies that will inhabit them**



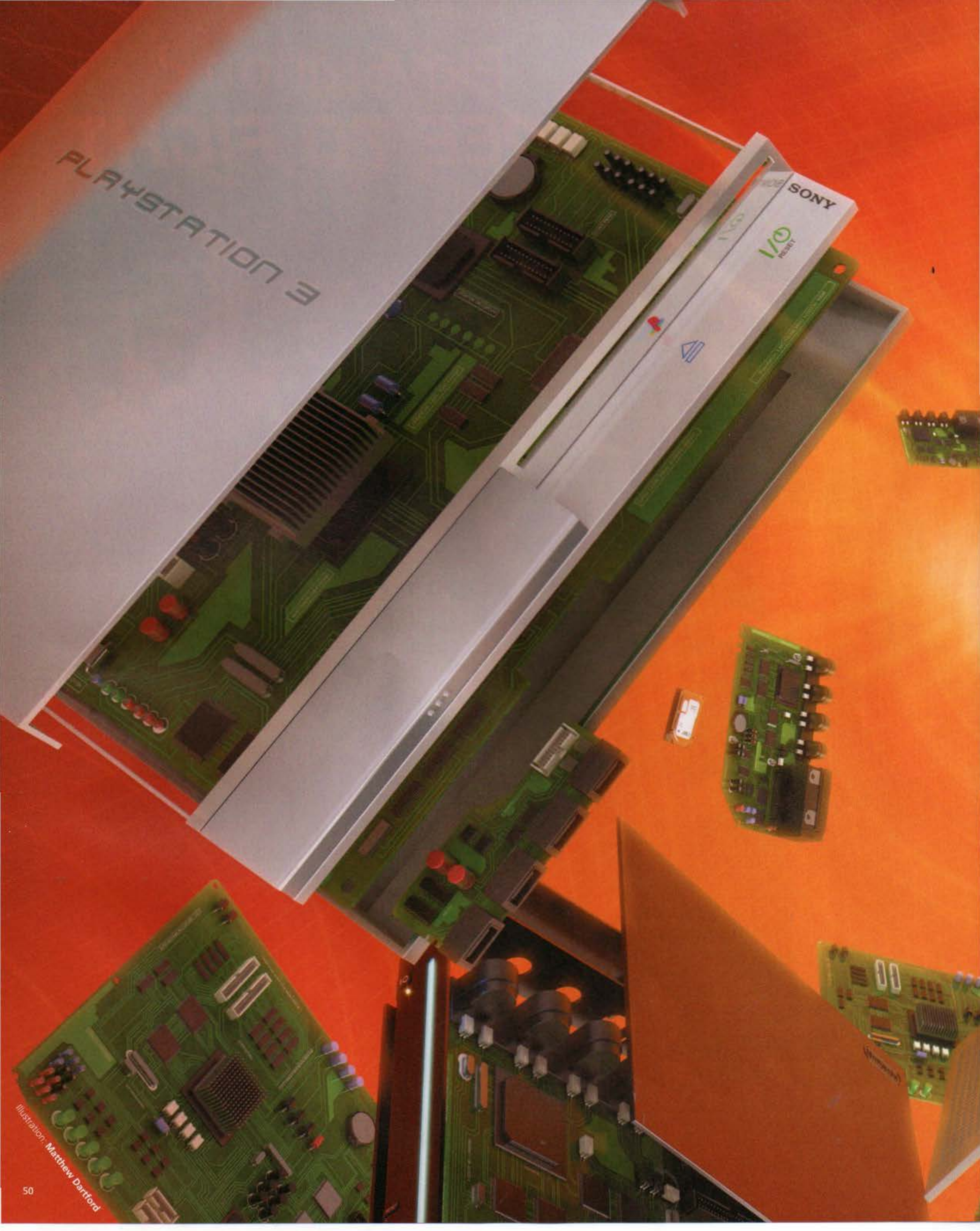


Illustration: Matthew Dartford

Look inside the future

The next generation is almost here. But what will its arrival really mean for gaming? We set out to find some answers

If we are to get a sense of what next-generation gaming hardware will actually bring to the table, the intelligent option is to approach those who'll be working with it. So that's what we've done, interviewing a range of industry execs who, in various ways, are in the process of forging new, often difficult relationships with silicon that will result in making electronic entertainment even more absorbing than it is today.

Some of them stand to make a lot of money from next-gen software (how much must *Half-Life 3* on PS3 be worth to Valve's Gabe Newell?), while others, such as Nvidia's Mark Daly, are rubbing their hands at the prospect of shifting expensive pieces of hardware, and then there's the likes of Andy Beveridge at tools specialist SN Systems who stands to benefit from an explosion of demand in his company's wares as a new breed of super-demanding architecture awaits. At the same time, though, look out for some apprehensive tones over the next few pages.

But first we take a look at some of the games setting out to define 'next generation', along with some of the techniques they'll be using in order to convince us why we're moving on.

First of the next generation

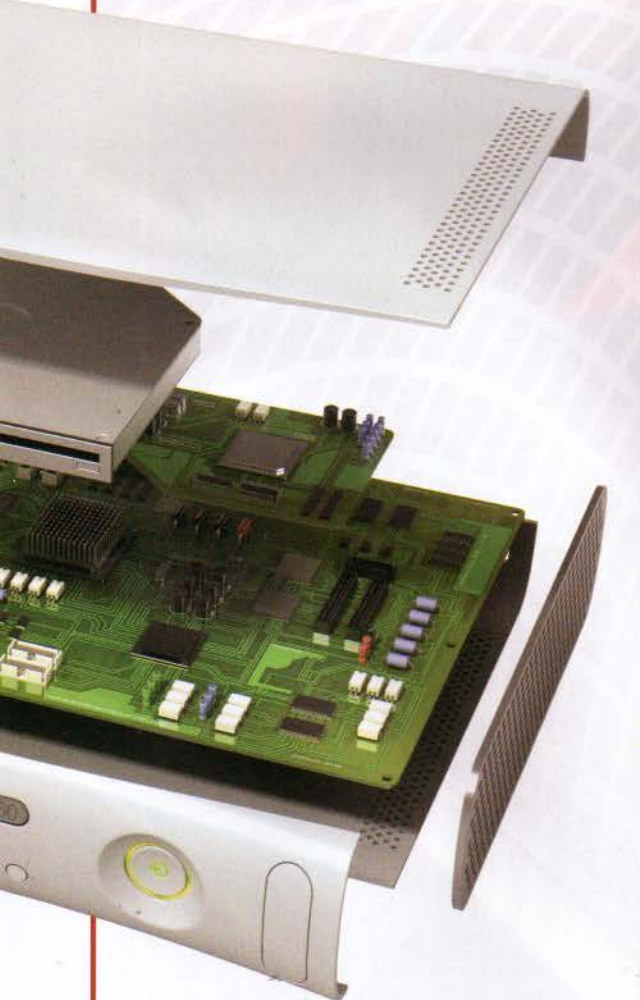
Not all of these titles will arrive alongside their host platforms' launches, but they'll be among the first next-gen games released. So what will there be that's worth seeing?



Team Ninja's *Dead Or Alive 4* on Xbox 360 will be first out of the blocks in Japan. Gameplay-wise there's nothing revolutionary here; it'll all be in visual clarity and incidental details such as clothing animation



Project Gotham Racing 3 (360) from Bizarre Creations will take realtime vehicle rendering to a new level, although its developer is also creating the most realistic road surfaces ever. But will you actually notice?

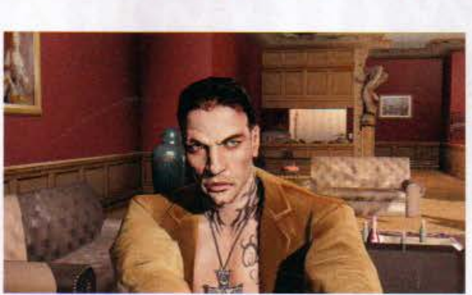




Call Of Duty 2 is one of a handful of titles that reveal their nature as dual-format PC/360 projects. The result is a game that looks polished but lacking in true spark. Expect it to evolve before its 360 release



American sports games are natural candidates for early appearances on next-gen hardware. Right now, though, it's difficult to get too excited about some slick animation in 2K Sports' *NBA2K6* on 360



Insomniac's *I8* is attempting to innovate by simply mixing genres, resulting in WWII-style FPS combat involving zombie-like enemies and a clutch of more sizeable foes. Set to be an early PS3 highlight



Capcom's *Dead Rising* (360) uses a simple design brief – one setting, with kill-the-zombies gameplay – and focuses on emphasising the scale of your assailants' mobs. Less innovation = easier development



Ubisoft has been working on next-gen games since before next-gen devkits existed, and its first fruit on PS3 will be *Killing Day*, an FPS with exaggerated physics effects and atmospheric story sequences

Another game that doesn't benefit from also being in development on PC is *Quake 4*: early 360 imagery offers little in the way of standout content. Further art passes on final devkits will count

Visual content: the new king

The first wave of next-generation software will offer little in the way of gameplay innovation. Instead, developers will be differentiating with techniques like these



Sheer scale

From *Heavenly Sword* (PS3) to *Ninety-Nine Nights* and *Kameo* (left) on 360, many developers are rejecting the notion that quantity should be rejected in favour of quality and are instead trying to deliver both: these games use their host platforms' rendering power to deliver *hundreds* of detailed characters simultaneously. The result, clearly, is an environment that immediately feels more alive, although you can be sure that games which strain to deliver swathes of variously attired NPCs rather than armies of clones will make for more captivating experiences.



Shaders/light maps

When realtime 3D game graphics started out, polygons were first filled, then flat shaded, then textured – and all at great expense to the host hardware. With next-generation technology, adding effects to 3D geometry is cheap and easy to implement. Many results will be subtle – metallic surfaces will truly reflect the environment, for instance, and you'll be able to notice the difference between an office wall painted with matt or gloss paint – but others, such as eerily lifelike human faces utilising subsurface scattering, will add a discernable new dimension to realtime game scenes.



New rendering tech

Normal mapping has been used in games for some time now, but a progression of bump mapping known as parallax mapping is set to be the most popular technique cited by developers when it comes to creating effective environmental results for little cost on next-generation hardware. While this scene from *Perfect Dark Zero* (left) utilises a cobbled pathway that looks complex in geometrical construction, it is in fact made up of only a handful of polygons. Expect to also see a glut of postprocessing techniques applied to titles to provide effects like super-saturated colour schemes and graininess.

Developers on next generation

We canvassed opinion on next-generation gaming from a varied cross-section of the creative community. They agreed on at least a couple of points...

David Braben (Frontier)



"'The next generation' seems to be a permanent fixture of this business; only last year or so, it meant PS2. Obviously now it refers to the Xbox 360, PS3, and Revolution, but it should mean a whole lot more. There were quite a number of titles at the recent E3 claiming this new banner but to be honest, most were simply games that had been graphically enhanced to take advantage of new rendering methods – high-dynamic-range lighting being the most obvious. Don't get me wrong, some looked very good on it (*Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* being perhaps my favourite from the show), but this is not yet true fifth-generation gaming.

"The major new thing these new machines bring is vast amounts of processing power, and this opens up whole new things games can do, particularly in terms of subtle character behaviours. Imagine characters that have hidden agendas; characters that lie to each other (and I don't mean in set-piece actor speech as part of a cut-scene) – the technical requirements to achieve this richness are huge – as are the new possibilities for the way the games play.

"E3 also was a bit of a watershed for people's feelings for 'next gen' – and perhaps an awakening. EA showed playable code of *Need For Speed* on Xbox 360, which looked pretty good, but it was quite slow and stuttery at times. OK, this is early code – but it highlights that the gulf between fourth and fifth generation in some respects is not as wide as some pundits have implied. System RAM is comparable to a low-end PC, with graphics at or above the top end of current PCs. When Sony first showed off the PS3 they showed some ducks in a bath of water. The water effects, "including realtime caustics" (as shown in stills in **E**151) were pretty – but ironically not dissimilar to the water (including caustics) in an already released title running on a GeForce 3 (Rollercoaster Tycoon 3: Soaked!). True fifth-generation games are more than a year away – after all, we are still getting ever more from PS2. It will be much like the transition from PS1 to PS2 – games will gradually improve, and the transition will only be noticeable when we look back at today with the benefit of hindsight from the future 'next generation'."

John Baez (Behemoth)



"If we were able to fast forward 20 years, I think you would be able to see a huge shift in the gaming industry for the years 2006/2007. The coming shift might be more fundamental than all the technological bar raising of the past few years simply because games can look very good with today's hardware. We're near the top of the technological curve now and that curve is looking pretty flat for the next 20 years. The next generation will give developers the power to make realistic, film-quality games, but those who eschew doing so will be the real winners. The greatest games of the next generation and subsequent generations will be those that break the mould of hyper-realistic rendering and experiment with new rendering techniques. Look, wouldn't it be strange to walk into an art museum and every painting on the walls was just trying depict reality in all its photoreal boredom? That is pretty much the current state of the console industry in rendering terms. Now imagine the feeling you'd get by buying a game because someone handcrafted it and that craftsmanship appealed to your particular senses. Where the next generation could take us might be much like independent music or art is today. If the hardware manufacturers are really interested in broadening their markets, they should support independent experiments and independent developers. Otherwise there'll only be ten games on the shelves and we'll all be bored out of our minds and doing other things for entertainment."

Alex Ward (Criterion)



"There are obviously a lot of different facets to next-generation. As seen at the hardware introductions held at E3, it's obviously graphics and improved visual quality that people respond to most quickly. Probably the biggest challenge of all is a structural one – this shift requires almost instant alignment and integration, both on a creative and technical level, of all these new available technologies. For most developers the next generation brings a lot of new things that we've never done before.

"This hardware transition also brings the shift from standard-definition television to high-definition television and this is something that the TV industry itself only just getting to grips with. Moving to HD is not just about delivering the raw technical prowess and the challenges associated there but I think it's also about great art direction along with great technology to bring a seamless high-quality visual experience to gaming. And it's doesn't stop with visuals. Next-gen also means delivering greater realism and emotional believability to games, and actually doing it, rather than talking around the houses like we all have for so long now. I guess it's the creative challenge that's the biggest one of all to make sure we continue to innovate with new ideas, new titles and new intellectual property. It's going to be extremely challenging, and like all other transitions before it, the stakes will be raised and not everyone will survive."

David Perry (Shiny)



"'Next generation' is a dangerous term when there's really only one point of view that matters – the gamer's. Without him being happy, we are all screwed. So I look at next generation as being the hardware companies' *duty* to give us the tools to keep that gamer happy, long term.

"New hardware usually enables new technology, and new technology enables new tools for game designers. If I tell you that you can now have 3,000 people onscreen, or can have buildings that collapse brick by brick, or be able to talk intelligently to a character in the game using a microphone, then the designers will be able to create new experiences.

"Let me contradict myself now. Really good programmers can make disruptive changes to what we think is current generation by some kind of discovery. Like one of our *Path Of Neo* programmers recently got 1,500 characters onscreen on the PS2. However, it's true that once the new discoveries die off, then the current generation will finally give in to the competition. How key is the hardware improvement? Well, if hardware upgrades are nominal, then they've given nothing *new* to the designer's tool chest, so they will trigger another five years of genre regurgitation.

"'Next generation' to me also means a chance to right the wrongs of the past, and to improve the input devices. Make controllers better, add new input features etc. I think Nintendo could earn the most credibility here, though Sony's EyeToy is a good example and so is Xbox live. We need more! A *lot* more! Back in the old days, the interface was made *for* the game (think *Pac-Man* vs *Tempest* vs *Missile Command*). So if you only fix one controller issue this time around, make firstperson shooter work on consoles! We need a mouse-replacement solution in every box. It won't happen, but I should mention it.

"That said, looking at how things are shaping up on the gamer side, I must admit I'm pretty excited. My biggest complaint of the last version of 'next generation' was the horrible amount of video and storage memory they included, meaning we end up spending so much time taking something that looks great and then crush it down, damaging it to fit into the restricted memory space. That's why you see so many amazing videos from developers at E3 – they're basically saying to hardware makers, "This is what we want to make! Please make the hardware!" Then they ship the final game and it's so bludgeoned to squeeze it into the hardware, it looks nothing like the original video demos. So they just wait for the next generation and try again.

"I'm feeling the hardware companies have reached a *lot* farther this time with RAM, and then you include the obvious upgrades – video/processor/sound – and I expect the combo to make a big difference – big enough for the gamer to see why he or she *needs* to upgrade.

"What I live for is all the new innovative features we'll see using the extra memory and processor bandwidth and the increased acceptance of technical research. When you look at *Spore*, you see the result of research mixed with great game design talent, meaning the stuff deemed too processor intensive will finally make it into shipping games. That's an example of innovation being enabled by hardware advances.

"Only when gamers are actually experiencing the new innovation will they declare our industry has delivered the 'next generation'."



The Nvidia equation

We spoke with Mark Daly, Nvidia's vice president of content development, in order to find out more about PlayStation 3's storming graphics solution

What does Nvidia bring to PS3?
There are a couple of things we bring to the table besides just the chip; there's an entire development environment that we have. With PS2 one of the knocks against it was that the development environment is really hard – it was like, "Here are our registers, go at it." So for a while there was a whole cottage industry for middleware providers on PS2 because it was so hard to program the thing. So we have a development environment that's a little more reasonable than that.

Who's doing the most exciting work on PS3?
I loved the Doctor Octavius demo, a lot of what they're doing on the shader for the skin the subsurface scattering in the ears and the lighting that's going on. It's interesting because a lot of the same things they showed in the Doctor Octavius thing is some of the stuff EA is working on with *Fight Night*. They didn't have the subsurface scattering but they had all the nice highlights and the bumpmapped boxers' faces – that was really well done. I think you're going to see that sort of stuff in both the PC and console space. With shaders on PS2 you could do some multipass effects, but there really wasn't a shader port, so it's going to be very interesting to see typical console developers adopting shaders.

Sony says that the prerendered sequences on its showreel will be achievable on the final PS3, but how do you forecast things like that?
It's pretty well understood what the theoretical capabilities of PlayStation 3 are going to be. In his presentation Jen-Hsun [Huang, Nvidia CEO] mentioned that there's going to be 100 billion shader ops per second, 51 billion dot products per second. Given that, and given the resolution size and given roughly the complexity of the scene, you can get a pretty good feel and say this is or this is not possible.

From your perspective, do you believe it's the step forward beyond Xbox 360 Sony claims it is?
Actually, I think it is. You've seen Luna, in realtime. This is the beginning of a product. Remember the first games that came out on PS2? It took six months' time before the more impressive games appeared. This time around the jump up straight away is massive, so imagine what they'll be able to do six months down the line. There's a huge amount of potential.

What's your take on the increased investment publishers and developers will have to consider when it comes to PS3 development?
I agree that there will be a fair amount of investment on the art side. It's funny because everyone goes, "Ooh, shaders, that's going to be harder, we're going to get some really smart engineers in here," and, yes, that's a little bit relevant, but actually you should hire some artists. Because I can write a somewhat generic skin shader that's applicable for my skin tone, your skin tone or someone else's skin tone – I just have to tweak the parameters – but someone has to go through and model you and me and everyone else and all the maps that are going into that shader, and that's not all that reusable, so I believe most of the scaling investment will have to go into the art side, with a little bit on the engineering side.

But it's true – it is more of an investment. But you know I almost think that a bit of consolidation may actually happen. With ATI and ourselves raising the bar technically now, the bar's getting pretty high for anyone wanting to come in. It's no surprise that Electronic Arts is doing so well. Electronic Arts has done a great job of figuring out: I'm going to sell a title, it's going to ship on this date, and damn it, it's going to ship. This industry is full of people saying, "Well, we think it's going to ship in the summer, maybe Christmas..."



Nvidia's Luna demo on PS3 devkits reveals the rendering capacity of even the unfinished RSX unit. Its light-casting abilities, which convincingly handle partial translucency effects, are fairly stunning

Gabe Newell (Valve)



"Right now, the benchmark game for the industry is Blizzard's *World Of WarCraft*. Whether it's based on polish, ease of updating, hours people spend playing, community involvement, subscription revenues, or what have you, it's what is showing game developers what they should be thinking about in their next generation of titles.

"If *World Of WarCraft* is the benchmark, then the next-generation platforms should be delivering functionality that should get other developers closer to that benchmark or give them tools to surpass *World Of WarCraft*. By and large the next-generation consoles don't seem to be helping us get there. Instead they give us this huge headache, in multicore; they are increasingly being limited graphically by the TV as their primary output device; the lead over the open-PC platform in graphics has been reduced at each new release; and they really seem to be ignoring the internet and connectedness as being the current driver of innovation.

"If Intel or Microsoft gave even a half-hearted effort to improve the PC as a living-room entertainment client, it could really be a challenge for the proprietary game machines."

David Cage (Quantick Dream)



"There is one thing that is really unique in our industry: technology moves faster than concepts. It is a little bit like if Boeing or Airbus were making new planes every week and pilots never had the time to learn fully how to drive them before a new plane is released. With next-generation consoles, everybody is talking about implementing physics engines, AI and amazing rendering, but we have not even finished with the possibilities of the current-generation consoles and yet we already have to move to the next.

"What fascinated me at E3 when I looked at the so-called next gen consoles was the incredible power of the hardware and the very disappointing concepts that were generally displayed. Do we really need that much power for so little creativity? More firstperson shooters, more American football games, more platform games?

Where are the new concepts? Where are the ambitious, brilliant new ideas that will use this great power to provide totally new experiences? Next-gen consoles will offer incredible graphics, animations and special effects, that's for sure. I am waiting to see what kind of creative use will be made of this. If it is to play the same games just with more polys, I think this industry will definitely lose an opportunity.

"We must invent the visionary concepts that will go with this great hardware and find new ways of interacting. Technology is just a tool. If you give me a better pen, I won't write a better book. The only thing that really matters is creativity. I am happy to play with these great new tools if they provide me with new creative possibilities."

An Epic undertaking

Epic was one of Sony's stars at E3. We asked vice president Mark Rein about his company's role in next-gen development, and how he sees the bigger picture



How did you manage to get Unreal Engine 3 up and running on PS3 so quickly?

We were working with a very familiar system even though we'd never touched it before. With OpenGL, well, Unreal Engine's been OpenGL since Unreal Engine 1, and when we did Macintosh or Linux versions those were OpenGL based. Linux tools; we've been doing Linux since the original *UT*, so we're very familiar with Linux. The PowerPC architecture; again, Macintosh, we've been doing that for many years, Xbox 360's also PowerPC based. 64bit; duh, we've been AMD's poster child for 64bit computing. And then of course Nvidia graphics; we've been working with Nvidia for ages, we, I think, have the best, most efficient engine on NV40 graphics, and [RSX] is obviously a later version of the same graphics that were in NV40, so we're they're very familiar parts, so it wasn't that really big a deal for us to be up and running with our engine. And once you have a whole engine with all the tools, I mean we can be cramming away on content on the PCs and just bring it over.

The most impressive thing was that we switched all our development PCs from Direct3D to OpenGL – which is just an simple switch in our engine, no big deal – and any time we created any content it looked exactly the same on PC as it did on PS3. The only thing was, even though we had these ass-kicking Nvidia 6800 Ultra SLI systems, when we got the actual RSX card, when we got the actual RSX card, even though it's not running anywhere near full speed, it was more than twice as fast as our SLI setup. So everything just came together so nicely. It took less than a week to get the engine up and running – without rendering, with just wireframe rendering – out at Sony's office. The first couple days the guys were just playing – we had no idea they'd come home with a working engine. That surprised us, because you know it was a new processor and all. And then once we got the kit it took a couple days to get it rendering and maybe another week or two to make it fast and efficient and learn our way around it.

So what's in your PS3 devkit?

It's a Cell processor and an RSX. Those are the main components of PS3. There are going to be other, faster things than we had in the devkit. You've heard about their amazing memory bandwidth – this doesn't have any of that. The early kits are fast like that, but they have Cell and RSX, so it really is a perfect development station for PS3 and anything you run on it is only going to run a hell of a lot faster on final hardware, not slower – you're not going to get any surprises or lose any features.

So you're a big fan of the architecture. Do you think the dev community as a whole is going to embrace it the way you have?

Oh, yeah, it's inevitable. There are various reasons why everybody gets a big smile on their face when they get something running on PS3. The chief one is because, well, it's not a PS2. So all those custom things you had to learn to get all the power out of the PS2, they're gone. I mean, yeah, you bring some of those ideas forward in terms of working with the Cell processor, but still, even though the cores on the Cell processor are PowerPC, they run much higher-level programs, so a lot of that speciality knowledge... it's not that it's totally unapplicable, it's just that you don't have to do that to get to the power of this thing. So I don't see anybody who's not going to be thoroughly excited at working with PS3.

"There are various reasons why everybody gets a big smile on their face when they get something running on PS3, the first being that it isn't a PS2"

Microsoft suffered because of Sony's E3 press conference; what was your take on it?

Well, I think Microsoft are a bit of a victim of their own success with Xbox 360; they're trying to be very true to consumers and true to themselves and running a lot of their demos on devkits, but the problem is that the devkit is a very small fraction – you'd be surprised how small – of the final expected performance of the machine.

It's about 30 per cent, right?

We think it's 25 per cent [chuckles]. That's why we weren't showing on a devkit. We told them there's no way we're showing our game on a devkit. We have Unreal Engine 3 running on devkits – that's how we got all these licensees – but... we think it's crazy. But we're not a launch title so we have a little extra time. The thing is, you know they're between a rock and a hard place – if they show it on PCs everybody's twice as sceptical than if they showed it on a very slow low-end machine that offers the components of a final machine. So they really can't win, in much the same way the original *Halo* showed badly at its first E3 but was a fantastic game. The funny thing is, I heard people complaining about *Perfect Dark Zero* but I saw it running in the actual rooms and it doesn't look anywhere bad as it looked on TV. So I don't know if they had a different version at E3, or what.

And it's going to look a lot better once Rare begins to optimise it for beta and final devkits.

It'll only get better in the same way *Halo* only got so much better, there's plenty of time for that. So like I say, I think Microsoft is a little bit of a victim of their own success. But the thing that I think they did really well with the E3 press conference was that they really let you understand the community. I don't know about a billion – they're not just saying themselves a billion, they're saying the next generation – and the only way we're going to get to a billion, or close to a billion, the only way to go that is to do exactly the things that they're doing, to build a machine that you're going to send to your grandfather or send to your uncles or your aunts, so they can watch your kids grow up through the videocams, the videoconferencing, through playing chess or checkers and talking over the voice communications, the ability to play your pictures off your PC, or off another



Epic's Unreal Engine 3 has already been made available to 360 and PS3 developers. Rein believes that next-gen console development will have an enormous knock-on effect to the PC gaming scene

Epic's *Gears Of War* is its big 360 hope (it's also due on PC). The game is a thirdperson shooter which casts you as a soldier fighting alongside fellow troops. This will be among the best-looking early 360 productions

machine, or import them, or do this or that; there really is the idea that Xbox Live becomes the glue, and I think that's very smart, it's brilliant in fact. And you know the thing is that I don't know is obvious is that it really is done – they really have that whole user interface up and running and working, it's very slick and very polished, and when you combine it with the final hardware it's going to be fantastic. They're going to have a great machine. Xbox 360 and PS3 are both going to be great machines.

And the thing that excites me as well is that PC users are going to be prime beneficiaries of all this, because in the past there was us and id that would maybe shoot for the stars and do really high-level high-performance stuff... well, everybody's going to be doing that now because they see the economic benefit of doing that in the consoles; most publishers do not see PC as a great economy but they clearly see PlayStation and Xbox brands as the place to be with gaming, so as they start to build the next-generation PlayStation and next-generation Xbox they're going to be making games that automatically shoot for the stars, so when they bring them over to PC, which is inevitable, they're going to be great, and they're going to be high-end games and they're going to bring about a renaissance in PC gaming. And Microsoft says, 'Hey, our Windows games can play with our Xbox games'. They're going to cause a lot of people to go out and buy the $500 video cards or the $300 video consoles, so I mean it's going to be all good. There's no question this is going to build the value of gaming. I was very impressed with the ideas, that they understand that everyone can be a gamer. Now, my dad, he's not a gamer, but he plays chess, so he'll happily play chess with me over Xbox Live, for example. And maybe he turns on the machine and gets a little ad for a game, and then goes, "Oh, I may not be an action gamer, but realtime strategy? It's kinda like chess." I think it's going to be good news.

Certainly Microsoft's vision is strong, but how do you think it goes about ousting a brand as strong as PlayStation?

I don't have a crystal ball on that and to be honest I'm selling games and technology on both so I want them both to be hugely successful, I want them both to have PlayStation-style success and then some. But the thing you have to realise is that you have Sony as an awesome consumer electronics brand and PlayStation is a really awesome gamer brand – the best there is, no questions asked – but you know Microsoft, everybody knows Microsoft, everybody knows Windows, everybody knows Xbox is no slouch; I mean in a very short period of time it's gone from zero to 20 million, it's clearly a credible brand.

I think it's going to have the sequel effect, you know the way some of these movies sequels vastly outsell the original, because the market expands and because they get more marketing dollars 'cos the familiarity of the brand is there. Also, the fact that Microsoft won't be losing money on every one means that they're going to be way more aggressive this time marketing-wise, so I wouldn't be surprised to see them both fairly close to each other. And I think Microsoft's brand will not hurt it, and then hopefully the marketing will... well, did you see the retail store at E3? They're clearly ready to turn it up a notch, so let's wait and see what happens.

We won't know at Christmas time, we won't even know next Christmas, we'll know the Christmas after that; we'll start to get a feel for who's doing what when the late-first and second-generation games will be coming, that's when the machines will be really hitting their stride, the first price drop...

You're going to see a lot of people jumping on and off the [pro-Xbox 360 or pro-PS3] bandwagon in the next ten to 12 months, right? And nobody's really going to know that early. And people who claim they do are just smoking crack.



The middleware perspective

Between hardware manufacturers and game developers sit tools technicians like SN Systems, uniquely placed to offer views on how next-gen hardware stacks up

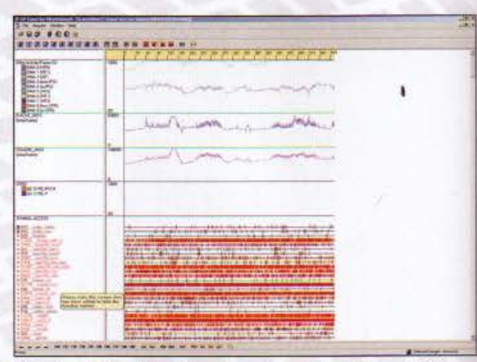
Bristol-based SN Systems, a company which provides tools for developers working on Sony and Nintendo consoles, evolved out of game developer The Assembly Line. Frustrated by the clunkiness of the tools available to developers, it began to make and distribute its own. Finding tool development a more profitable and less-stressful alternative to game making, it took advantage of the increasing complexity of consoles to found a new company dedicated to streamlining the game-making process. Now established as a key component of many studios' production process, it provided the tools for 20 out of the 24 US launch titles for PSP. We spoke to **Martin Day** and **Andy Beveridge**, co-founders and directors, about what next-gen hardware means for game development.

You supply tools for Sony and Nintendo consoles, but what's the real need for your technology? What's missing?

Martin Day: Neither of them have any big in-house tools groups – traditionally we got into this business because companies like Sega would get – either internally or externally – some tools made which were just about usable for making games, but we could make something that would be a lot faster or more efficient, or have better features. That's how we got started out, by being able to do the job better than the internal teams.

Andy Beveridge: Until Microsoft came along, the console manufacturer would just cobble together whatever got the job done – because they were focused on the games and not the tools – so as soon as they got something usable they would be off making games, and they lose track of the tools and then just pass what they had on to the developers. They just tend to work with whatever they're given – they'll just put in extra hours to get the job done if they need to. But if someone like Microsoft comes along and offers easier-to-use tools...

Microsoft has made a lot of noise about how much better its tools and support are for Xbox developers. Are Sony and Nintendo handing Microsoft an advantage?



SN Systems' Tuner (above) has already proved popular on PS2; expect a PlayStation 3 version to appear sooner rather than later

"The whole high-def thing is new – I don't think we really have a good perception of what one teraflop or 1.8 teraflops of high-def game actually looks like"



AB: I don't think they're giving anything away, necessarily. I think it's just a different way of doing things. Microsoft have some very good tools available internally.

After E3, the focus has snapped back very much to hardware. What did you make of the way the companies set out their stalls?

AB: It was a much better show than I expected. You never know how these presentations are going to go – the likes of Microsoft can do something very slick, which they sure did, but the Sony approach was much more – I found it quite reassuringly amateur – just people getting up on stage and saying, 'Hey, we've got some stuff'. But what I wasn't expecting to see was some of those demos – they quite blew me away.

Do you buy Sony's line that the game videos represent how PS3 games will actually look?

AB: I always take that kind of thing with a pinch of salt. We had the same thing at the Xbox launch, with that beautiful dancing robot, and I've never seen anything like that yet on the Xbox.

After the hardware launches, things fairly rapidly descended into a spec war. Which, to your mind, is the more powerful machine?

AB: The overall impression we have with developers is that everyone perceives the PS3 to be slightly or significantly more powerful than 360. That's going to make quite a bit of difference, since everyone is pushing high-def so hard. High-def means a lot more pixels to be drawn, a lot more throughput, so that little bit more power that PS3 has could be quite significant. But what you have to bear in mind is that people's perception of the PS3 is based on what they think they're going to be getting in devkits probably in a few months' time, rather than on what they have now. And also that the Xbox devkits are not yet full speed, either.

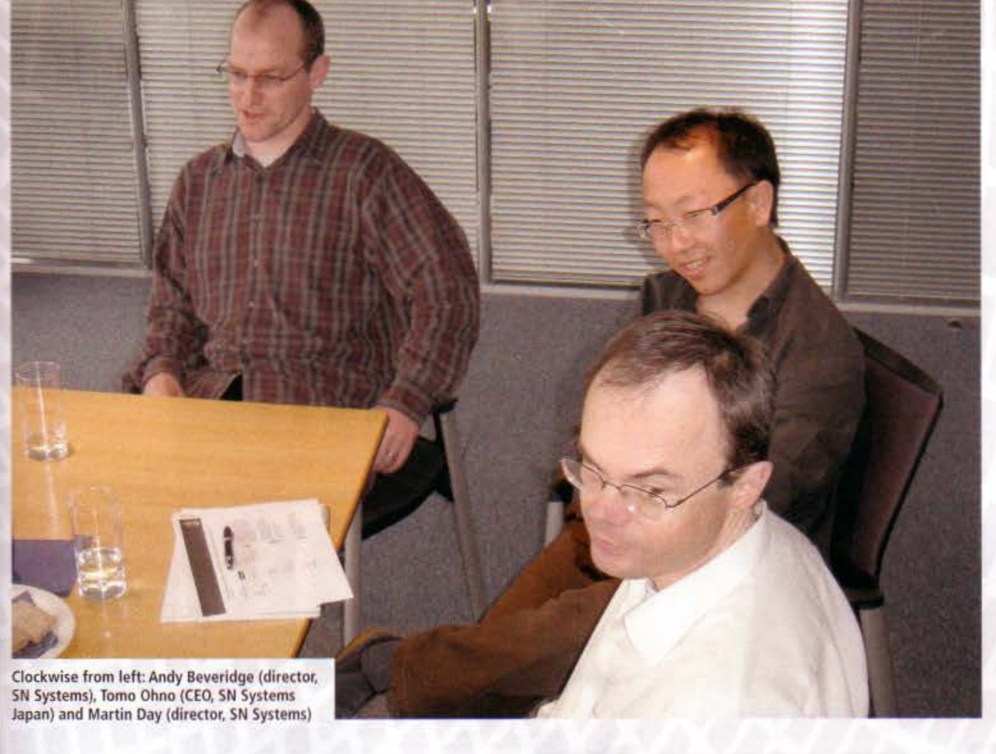
What sort of difference do you think we'll see between games on the two platforms?

AB: At the end of the day, it's going to come down to what the game developers do with that power. If they don't use it, it might as well not be there. And a lot's going to depend on which becomes the lead platform. Currently there are a lot more 360 devkits out there than PS3, so the natural lead platform right now is Xbox. And if Microsoft can hang on to that, then even if PS3 is more powerful, if games are converted from 360 to PS3, they're not going to be inclined to make the most of the PS3's power. But if PS3 devkit volume ramps up, and developers are comfortable enough working with it – there's a lot of 'ifs' in this! – but if they find it easy enough to work from, then they'll make it the lead platform and then that bit of power will make a real difference.

How different will writing for the new generation be compared to current-gen coding?

AB: Everyone's making a big deal out of the new CPUs and the multiple CPUs but a bigger issue is the multithreading approach to writing the code. This





Clockwise from left: Andy Beveridge (director, SN Systems), Tomo Ohno (CEO, SN Systems Japan) and Martin Day (director, SN Systems)

generation it's becoming increasingly important for the developers to reuse code. They got used to the idea that you reuse large pieces of code in new projects for reasons of economy. But the code they're looking to reuse at the moment – the early code from the new hardware – just does not use multithreading in a way that is appropriate for the new machines, and I think multithreading is going to be the key thing. OK, the Sony solution and the MS solution are a little different, in that the MS solution looks more orthogonal with lots of things all the same, and the Sony one has this big division between the SPUs and the main CPU, but it still comes down to getting your task running between multiple units. But some big pieces of a game just do not want to be multitasked – things like collision detection aren't naturally suited to being split up. Certainly not the way it's being done at the moment. Right now, most people have single-threaded game engines.

So does that mean early next-gen games looking to reuse engines and technology from existing projects are going to have bodge things?

AB: [Laughs] Yeah, definitely, there'll be an awful lot of bodging initially. It can't really be helped, though, since developers haven't really worked with this sort of thing before. But they don't have any choice – they're going to have to figure it out, and I'm pretty positive that two or three years down the line developers will be doing a damn good job of using all the power of the machines.

What will be the giveaway – which element of the game will suffer if the code isn't tailored to the new architecture?

AB: I'm expecting the main difference to be the visual quality – it'll be the quality of what's drawn and the amount that gets drawn. The question is, how much difference will it make? Because the whole high-def thing is new – I don't think we really have a good perception of what one teraflop or 1.8 teraflops of high-definition videogame actually looks like. So it may be very significant, it might not.

But it's worth remembering it's not necessarily about the CPUs – everyone's focusing on that, but the two machines aren't that different, they're all multiple CPUs – the Sony machine does seem to have a significant amount more CPU power, but it's how you connect it all together and how you use memory that matters. Microsoft has taken a different approach to memory, and that's where the differences are between the two machines. That's going to be the big difference on working on them.

And that difference is going to make cross-platform development harder.

AB: Yeah, I'm wondering that as well [laughs]. That's something I want to talk to a few developers about.

You're in the business of making tools to make the development process simpler. Does that mean you want the next-generation hardware to be as convoluted and arcane as possible?

MD: [Laughs] Within limits – we have to stay sane!

AB: And we have to be making tools that the developers can afford. We need things to be complicated, but not too complicated.





NEW MOD

For many UK developers, bridges from overseas publishers are a path to invasion



ELARMY

Kuju, however, has a different battle plan

The area of the South Bank that houses the Tate Modern, the Globe Theatre and the indecisive curves of the Millennium Bridge is as good an example of London's nebulous personality as anywhere. Here, any person is an everyday person, reaching out to, enriching and duly learning from the culture clash. Here, also, stands the studio headquarters of Kuju – a UK developer with a worldview that's no less progressive. This is a company that has, with its latest projects, built bridges with Sony, Konami, Activision and, stunningly, Nintendo.



Within walls adorned with internally commissioned and produced concept art, Mark Washbrook juggles immense satisfaction with his studio's efforts with apprehension as to the response of Nintendo's QA division, Mario Club, to the recently submitted near-final product. That response will determine if and when *Battalion Wars* is ready for manufacture

But as chairman **Ian Baverstock** confirms, the company must now not only prove itself to its publishers, but future-proof itself for the industry's imminent upheaval.

Founded in 1989 as simulation developer Simis, and merged into Eidos in '95, Kuju has existed as an independent entity for the last seven years. When Baverstock and managing director Jonathan Newth took the company out of Eidos, there were 35 people on the books. Now, across four sites, those ranks have swelled to 180. For the company's next evolution, Baverstock's game plan is crystal-clear: "We're moving to a model now where studios will be broadly capped in size in terms of the number of people – somewhere in the 40-80 range. Below that isn't creatively viable and above is probably too big to form a creative entity. This also fits in with our view that you've got to have expertise, passion and track record in a particular direction. The days when you could be a general jobbing developer turning up and rapping on a publisher's door saying, 'Got any work, guv?' have gone."

So, as with Climax and its Racing, Action and Online divisions, Kuju is becoming a network of specialist cells, optimising its distribution of talent and technology to weather a storm that's already claiming livelihoods the world over. The company's Brighton studio, therefore, has leapt from the blocks of Sony's *EyeToy: Play 2* to follow a dedicated path of lifestyle game development. Kuju Surrey is focusing on racing, action and online action games following its delivery of network components for *Call Of Duty: Finest Hour*. Sheffield, meanwhile – formed to exploit the demise of Sony Leeds, Infogrames' Sheffield House and several local independent studios – is expected to soon move from its recent portfolio of platform conversions to a more personalised domain. Finally, the London studio in which we're sitting will continue to develop its action/strategy games while a new simulation division engineers a project that we'll come to later.

Ian Baverstock, Kuju's chairman, has a plan to see the company become a network of smaller, specialised teams

"We're moving to a model now where studios will be broadly capped in terms of the number of people – somewhere in the 40-80 range"



The office of Kuju London is a modest one, offering just enough space to separate its two teams. While one of these continues to add polish to *Battalion Wars*, the other wraps up work on Konami's tactical FPS, *The Regiment*

Baverstock has an evident soft spot for the Brighton studio, populated as it is with former Kuju staff reclaimed from *Prisoner Of War* developer Wide Games. "The way it actually worked was that we picked up the team rather than the company, and then we acquired the rights to *Pilot Down* as well." Having played a near-complete build of that game – a cel-shaded WWII stealth adventure with comic-book overtones and *Max Payne*-style cut-scenes – it's a shame to reveal that its dated mechanics and overall appearance betray its three-year development stretch. "The rights for *Pilot Down* were an opportunistic thing," he concedes. "It has some nice features and I think it plays quite well, but it's slightly old-school and it looks old-school."

Wide's favoured asset, then, wasn't so much its product or reputation as its people – their experience as independents theoretically outweighing their achievements. "In terms of actually picking up the people, it's been fantastic," says Baverstock. "They'll probably admit themselves that they've learned a huge amount by being an independent studio. The other thing I think is really nice about Brighton is the combination of the environment and the workplace. Brighton does seem to fit very well with us having this kind of lifestyle division. Although you've got Climax's racing team, you've also got Relentless down there and there's a general atmosphere conducive to developing lifestyle games."

This notion of synergy between the developer and its environment holds





MEN ON FIRE

Kuju London has a track record for developing solid and enjoyable games that, though seldom noted for their financial success, aren't afraid to try something adventurous. "*Fireblade*," remembers Washbrook, "was a pretty hard title. We were establishing a new team, with new people working together on a game style that none of us had done before. *Reign Of Fire*'s game design very much suited the *Fireblade* engine, so it allowed us to build it while adding a bit more character. We'd always anticipated growing the studio into a two-team studio, and with that we ended up doing it a little earlier than we'd planned. When part of the team here did the online element of *Warhammer 40,000: Fire Warrior* – the first PS2 online title – it was the first time as a studio that we'd split into two teams."

significant weight for Baverstock. Over lunch, he openly considers the outlandish locations that would potentially benefit a developer of unpretentious party games. Ibiza is suggested and, momentarily, he's lost in thought, much like Tony Wilson probably was before packing the Happy Mondays off to Barbados. But rather than the birth of a catastrophe, what we're witnessing here is the fanciful reasoning of a man who isn't afraid to imagine, someone whose business acumen appreciates the role of inspiration in the creative process.

Does Kuju, we ask, believe its model to be one representative of UK development's future? "For the bigger studios, I think what we're doing will be what other people are trying to do. There's also a completely different path, however, where there's one team in one place, focused very much on one thing. Like Sports Interactive and Creative Assembly – they could never benefit from trying to do what we're doing.

"Another thing," he continues, "is that we're all going to have to come to terms with models where you're not necessarily doing all of the game. People are going to have to come up with cleverer solutions for actually making a game off-site with different groups of people. Again, I think we need a certain size and a certain organisational structure to support that kind of development. We've been developing cross-site now for three years. That's quite a shock when you first do it, but once you can it's quite a powerful thing to be able to do."

"I think one of the things that we've learned is that you have to allow studios to develop in their own direction. They really have to start finding their own way in life to be viable – they can't sit there and live off each other because they don't really add value to or help each other. Publishers are now looking for people clearly focused on a particular space." And that last point, as any independent would agree (so long as you don't ask Valve), is development's bottom line. Though the company's recent relationships speak for themselves, Baverstock is keen to reinforce its appreciation of the distributor's role.

"What you're trying to do all the time is move up the ladder of which publishers you work with, because clearly the big publishers have better distribution, bigger budgets and better marketing budgets. Like it or not, the way to create hit games is partly to create great games and partly to make sure someone's out there selling them in the market."

That's more easily said than done, of course, which makes one hell of a testament out of Kuju London's current relationship with Nintendo. Since its announcement last year, the studio's development of *Battalion Wars* – a companion piece for the feverishly celebrated *Advance Wars* series – has divided, confused and excited fans in equal measure. For London studio head **Mark Washbrook** and his staff, it's a quantum leap to round off years of measured growth.



The vehicles of *Battalion Wars*, bristling with armaments and mounted personnel, have certainly captured much of the *Advance Wars* art style. What's unclear at this point is if the spirited nature of its characters has survived



In the last couple of years, "reveals Washbrook, "we've moved to using a more flexible style of staffing for our projects. Whereas previously we had, say, teams of 20-25 people per title, we've moved in the last couple of years to having an element of contracting and outsourcing within our teams (see 'Hired guns'). With the UK development scene being as it has been lately, we've been able to get an awful lot of talent from the market. We have people from Bullfrog, Black Cactus, Argonaut, Computer Artworks, Elixir – pretty much most of the studios you can think of that have closed in the last year or so. It's really helped enrich the studio.

"*Battalion Wars,*" he continues, "started off in life as a concept called *Versus* – something that I developed at my old company before joining Kuju. Tanc [**Tancred Dyke-Wells**, the project's creative director] and his team did a prototype, basically because no one could understand the gameplay that was being described in the document. It got to the stage where the only real way to prove that this was going to be fun was to do a little demo. So we built that on PS2, which basically combined the core aspects of the game. We had some units with different attributes that we intended to cover – a basic rifle guy, a flamethrower guy, a small tank you could jump in and out of and a small island so you had some enemies to play with. People could then get to grips with the fact that you weren't just one individual unit – you were all your units and you could just transfer control between them." Having pitched that demo to a number of publishers which, according to Baverstock, were but a step away from "calling in the men with white coats," the company crossed paths with Nintendo, which found interest in the proposed gameplay combination, not least because of its *Pikmin*-style cursor.





"They saw a unique combination of mechanics," Washbrook says, "that produced a game that they hadn't seen before. So Nintendo fuelled what they call an 'experiment', to allow us to build more of this game for them to get a better idea of how a mission would play. In the beginning, they came over and said, 'We don't really like the game, how much would it be to produce something that shows more of the vision?' Then they just said, 'Go away and do it'."

Nintendo was soon handed a further demo – essentially the prototype converted to GameCube but embellished with more units and a more substantial control system, centred on one singleplayer map. "It was at that point," says Washbrook, "that they said, 'We really like the game, and we've got a *Wars* theme – a military theme which includes *Advance Wars* and other titles that we plan to include'. So they expressed their interest in pairing up our title with *Advance Wars*, which was good and bad in equal measure."

Indeed, the characteristics of the *Advance Wars* franchise make it an intimidating bedfellow. Before even considering its supreme elegance as a turn-based strategy game, its art style is a blend of superdeformed hardware and lovingly rendered anime that's enamoured a fiercely protective legion of fans. For Kuju, the acceptance of *Battalion Wars* by its publisher and prospective followers is a concern that overshadows, understandably, the question of how many units will eventually shift. The key, it seems, is establishing the project's creative position and ensuring that consumer expectations are appropriately calibrated.

"One of the problems," explains Washbrook, "was always that we'd never intended to be *Advance Wars*. Nintendo, from the outset, had always said: 'We want you to create the game you want to build – we don't want you to build something different just because there's an association'. They see this as part of its military-themed franchise, together with *Advance Wars* and *Fire Emblem*. They were pretty clear about that and, in fact, all the way through development Nintendo have been very hands-off with the project, visiting us only five times in the last 12 months. They give you the ownership of the title, which makes you work even harder to match their expectations."



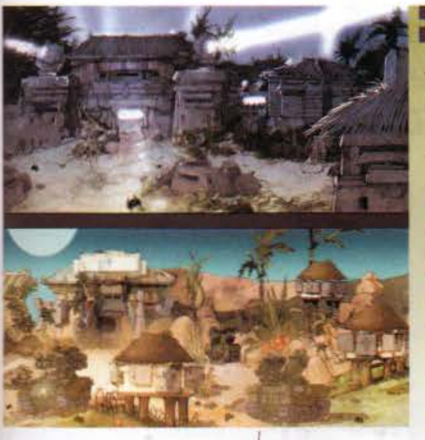
***Battalion Wars'* icon-driven interface is immediate and intuitive, its context-sensitive controls incorporating only two main buttons that expand into separate trees of wait and follow commands**

"Nintendo, from the outset, said: 'We want you to create the game you want to build'"

This doesn't just make for a double-edged sword, in that the company which could best guide Kuju's hand is oddly refusing to do so, but one of many that are discussed with consistently knife-edged enthusiasm. Nintendo, it's revealed, has been reluctant to even hint at how it thinks development is progressing. Now, a substantial build of the game is due to be returned from Mario Club – the publisher's celebrated internal quality-assurance facility – together with the first proper impressions. To say that the London studio is quaking in its boots would be no understatement, not least because of its publisher's seemingly devout faith in its efforts.

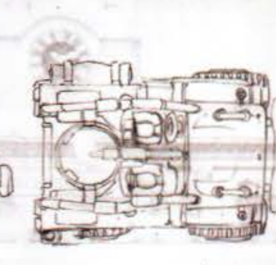


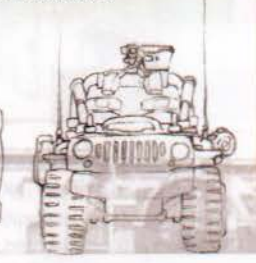
Included in the arsenal of *Batallion Wars* vehicles are light and heavy recon units and tanks, mobile artillery, battle stations that act as massively armoured dreadnaughts, and various aircraft including fighters and bombers



HIRED GUNS

Though original *Advance* Wars artists such as Ryo Hirata and Makoto Shimojo aren't involved, *Battalion Wars* is a worthy case study of Kuju's new outsourcing model. At its peak, the game's team totalled 50 people, with external contractors working on aspects of its art, music and script. "We have a sound-effect technician down in Brighton who's done all the sound effects for the game," reveals Washbrook, "storyboard artists in Paris, and a hi-res cut-scene modeller based in Amsterdam. It's really been quite a fun exercise to find these talented people to work on the project, and quite a bit easier since we had Nintendo attached."







"As a studio," says Dyke-Wells, "we have the humility to have been quite happy had Nintendo parachuted their top guys in to oversee the project. But that's not what they felt was necessary, which has been great. It's likewise with Intelligent Systems. I was tremendously looking forward to a more collaborative relationship than, in fact, we've enjoyed with them. I think Nintendo thought it was more beneficial to set up what they characterise as friendly competition between the two studios. We weren't able to benefit from their input in a way I would have welcomed."

So what, then, is *Battalion Wars* exactly? Those who saw the game at this year's E3 (or, indeed, the previous year when it was still entitled *Advance Wars: Under Fire*) will know the basics. This is a hands-on, ballistic blend of strategy and action, not an interpretation of *Advance Wars*, but an entirely different, home console experience tailored to resemble it. You are always one of your troops, viewed from either immediate thirdperson or a more global camera. Though initially limited to the strategic fundament of choosing the right unit for the right job in the right situation, the game strikes an increasingly clear balance between mind and munitions, the placement of enemy troops soon punishing reckless assaults.

The redundancy of comparison with *Advance Wars*, in fact, quickly becomes obvious, the design of the two games linked only by the threads of artistry and level design. Much is made of the game's accessibility, elicited by a multifunctional troop icon interface that draws great mileage from only two primary buttons. The team describes the game's lock-on system with reference to *Zelda* and *Metroid*, conveying not only its simplicity but the underlying recognition that, despite the publisher's considerate attitude, there's still the unspoken expectation of a Nintendo factor in the final product.

It's difficult to gauge the degree to which the game's structure will exploit its simple controls without playing from beginning to end, but there's a definite sense of equilibrium in *Battalion Wars* – the original spirit of *Versus* and the trappings of *Advance Wars* meeting amicably without great discord. Representing a transition in keeping with the series' move to GameCube, however, it's the adoption and adaptation of the series's visual theme that will attract the hardest scrutiny.

"When *Versus* was an original title," says Dyke-Wells, "it had a range of inspiration sources. But while *Advance Wars* features traces of *Cannon Fodder* and *Metal Slug*, we tried to forge our own style – chunky and cartoony, but with rich detail – more like the new *Zelda* as opposed to *Wind Waker*." Has Nintendo, we ask him, tried to steer the game towards a particular age group or market? "If you're asking whether Nintendo have asked us to adhere to their house style, I'd say no in that the original game had this very playful, lighthearted quality. That really wasn't geared to a younger market, but to providing something that had all the action, aggression and satisfaction of a war title without the grim, realistic and politically unpleasant nature of reality. To some extent, they felt that it was a good fit with the *Advance Wars* franchise because they share that vision."

"This," declares Washbrook, "is the pinnacle – the focus for this studio. It's been running for five years now and when I set the studio up the goal was always to steer away from doing Kuju's traditional style of title and move towards more action-oriented console games. If there's anything we're painfully aware of, it's that we have an enormous amount to prove. We're doing a secondparty title for Nintendo, which is a pretty cool achievement in itself, and sometimes it feels like it's been an enormous amount of luck as well as blood, sweat and tears. People last year were saying: 'Oh my god, they've given this title to Kuju – why in the hell have they done that?'"

"The last impression we wanted to give," concludes Dyke-Wells, "was that we had no regard for the original licence, and it's been hard for us to bite our tongues when accused of having taken *Advance Wars* and changed it. Personally, I'm very confident that people will come around to appreciate what we've done."



Tancred Dyke-Wells (known by the team as 'Tanc') demonstrates various stages throughout the game that effectively illustrate its nods to other Nintendo titles, specifically *Zelda*, *Metroid* and *Pikmin*. Though there's a concern that its overly helpful targeting system may undermine its difficulty, the team insists that the strategic element will balance out the challenge

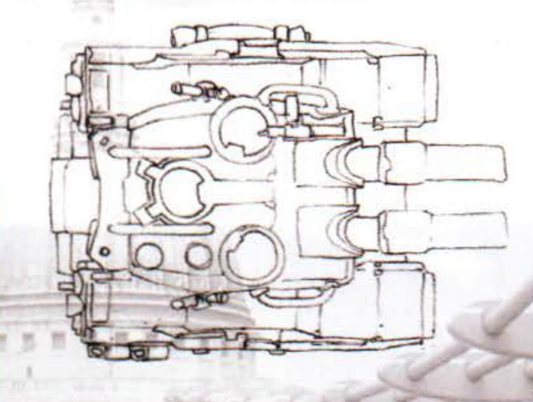


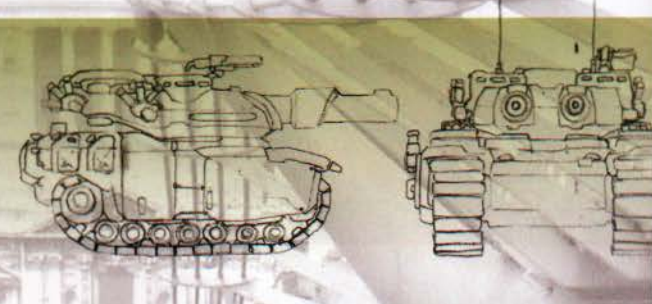
TITLE: **BATTALION WARS**
FORMAT: **GC**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **KUJU LONDON**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **2005**



Kuju has tapped into and established itself in a wide variety of interrelated markets, with upcoming, unannounced projects for both PSP and next-generation formats. Right now, however, the company's wireless divisions provide the most compelling evidence, Kuju Wireless Development having produced mobile titles such as *Spy Hunter*, *Lotus Challenge*, *Ambistax* and *Judge Dredd*, while Kuju Wireless Publishing handles the distribution both of those games and titles by other studios such as Tower and Caveman Arts. Distribution agreements exist between Kuju and several worldwide operators and aggregators, including Vodafone, O2 and, horrifyingly, Jamster – the American company that, with Crazy Frog, has made British TV less watchable.







TITLE: **THE REGIMENT**
FORMAT: **PC, PS2**
PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **KUJU LONDON**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **2005**

No one at Kuju would deny that *Battalion Wars* is the company's most pressing and most significant concern. If Nintendo is satisfied and the reception is good, the romantically improbable ties between the two companies will strengthen; if not, then Kuju London wouldn't be the last to suggest that those ties might abruptly snap. But an appreciation of the company's upcoming, overall portfolio brings appreciation of the degree to which the sea change in publishing attitudes, especially in Japan, tallies with its new model.

"I was out in Japan last year with TIGA," says Baverstock, "and we're working with Konami and Marvellous, who are a relatively small publisher now. There's a common thread of Japanese publishers wanting to create global content and recognising that one solution to that is going to other parts of the world to get the content developed."

"Historically," Washbrook confirms, "they've been in situations where they've given a title to a western developer, the developer hasn't been able to do it and they had to bring in all of their guys or ship the developer out to Japan in order to get the title finished. That's something they can't continue to do – they simply don't have the bandwidth."

For Konami, then, a separate team at Kuju London is polishing its tactical firstperson shooter, *The Regiment*. Presented in collaboration with SAS embassy siege veteran John McAleese, the game bears more than a passing resemblance to Irrational's *SWAT 4*, though its choice of locations looks set to add some spice to its four-tier campaign. Through faithfully textured tube stations, office buildings and, interestingly, the Palace of Westminster, the game champions procedure, tactical spontaneity and respect of authentic military concepts above all. We're told about one specific example, the 'fatal funnel' – a zone of intense fire that, for the seasoned soldier,



The early missions in *Battalion Wars* call upon a strategic choice that many, if not most gamers will immediately recognise. Enemy bases can be infiltrated through either an obvious or concealed entrance, the former guaranteeing a chaotic firefight, the latter offering a more time-consuming, but also manageable and less hazardous approach











Its dynamic of procedure overcoming chaos will be familiar to *SWAT* fans, but there's definite appeal in the evocative London locales that feature in *The Regiment*, detailed as they are with dozens of photographed textures

TITLE: **CITY OF THE DEAD**
FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **HIP INTERACTIVE**
DEVELOPER: **KUJU SURREY**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **SPRING 2006**

TITLE: **EYETOY: PLAY 3**
FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **SCEE LONDON, KUJU BRIGHTON**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER**

TITLE: **RAIL SIMULATOR**
FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **KUJU**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **TBA**



As is evident in the build demonstrated to us, most of *Battalion Wars* is now finished. Work still to be done includes the replacement of placeholder vocals with final dialogue, the improvement of several elements of the user interface, and the addition of approximately 15 minutes of full-motion cinematics created to illustrate a story that, it's revealed, casts the player as more than just a single army

is the reason you don't linger in doorways while tackling a terrorist siege. Somewhat familiar and, some would say, late to a crowded party, it's difficult to judge whether *The Regiment* will land with the impact Kuju is expecting.

City Of The Dead, on the other hand – the first foray of Hip Interactive's 'George A Romero Presents' series – should turn some heads with its liquidised blend of arcade modes, novelties and exquisite gore flung across reliable urban, military and remote island environments. The casting of genre effects veteran Tom Savini as the game's lead should help ensure that the game lives up to its name, though the claims of it being 'the *Burnout* version of the firstperson shooter' would hold more weight had Criterion's *Black* not already thundered along that avenue, smashing all the windows and splintering all the doors as only Criterion can.

City Of The Dead should turn some heads with its liquidised blend of novelties and gore

Brighton continues to enjoy its collaboration with another of the big league players. "They started off doing some work for Sony with *Play 2*," remembers Baverstock, "and it was really nice to get straight into that relationship. I know I've said you have to work up to these things, but what they did by falling into a project with a firstparty of Sony's capabilities was fantastic. Moving on then, as they are, to working on *Play 3* with another studio [SCEE London] is really a great way to go for their first full project." Most recently, however, has come the announcement that Kuju's simulation studio, hard at work on undisclosed material for over a year, is to release the fruits of its labours through EA – a game entitled *Rail Simulator*. The nightmarish task of developing such a title and meeting the gaspingly pedantic demands of its audience completely tips the scales on its niche market, making the project one that, even if its appeal is lost on the majority of people, still deserves respect.

So say what you like about Kuju, about the moderate success of its previous games and the yet-unproven strength of *Battalion Wars* as it nestles into one of Nintendo's most auspicious franchises, but don't forget to give credit to one of this country's few surviving independents – a company with a plan for the future and the world at its door.



Players of *City Of The Dead* should derive ample guilty pleasure in the wallpapering of its environments with variously sized crimson chunks, the unpretentious gameplay serving up hordes of undead begging to be gibbed









Grumpy Island

A meeting with the writer of Secret Of Monkey Island reveals gaming's moodiest commentator is still one of its most passionate proponents

Though **Ron Gilbert** began work at Lucasfilm Games during its formative 8bit era, it was his creation of *Maniac Mansion* and the SCUMM engine behind it that led to his most renowned successes with the opening *Monkey Island* games. Gilbert left LucasArts to co-found both *Total Annihilation* developer Cavedog and children's entertainment publisher Humongous, before stepping back from the industry entirely – later to re-emerge as an equal parts wistful and scathing blogger, the Grumpy Gamer (www.grumpygamer.com). We met Gilbert in London to discuss the directions he feels the industry could take in the next generation, and the direction he personally intends to take his upcoming 'RPG adventure' title.

Some years before you started a blog, you voiced your disappointment with the way gamers can behave online – has the response to the blog changed your opinion?

For the most part people have been pretty respectful on my site: I guess people feel like: 'We're in his home, so we'll keep it polite'. It's been fun. A couple of the things I've written have been pretty controversial – the one on *Zelda* [Gilbert was disappointed by the more predictable visual style – "I'll still buy it on day one, but if any game could have got away with a completely new approach to art direction, it's *Zelda*," he qualifies] quadrupled the number of hits and got me torn apart on other sites, so I'd be lying if I said it didn't affect me at some level.

The internet's an interesting social phenomenon because it can give everybody an equal voice, but it's the loudest voices that are usually heard. The anonymity makes it so easy to scream about stuff rather than constructively talk about it.

But you chose not to post Grumpy Gamer anonymously.
No, I wanted it to be me – I wanted people to know what I thought, that I was a little disillusioned with the business. But I love the business to death, it's not like I want to go: 'Ah, screw you' and go sell real estate or something, I love making games. And so I really wanted to talk about the stuff that I didn't like about the industry, the directions it was going, and I felt that I needed to do that as me.





Ron Gilbert's best-known works are *The Secret Of Monkey Island* and *Maniac Mansion*, both products of what used to be Lucasfilm Games. His new PC project might well offer echoes of both adventures

Do you think voices like yours are important to provide an appreciation of videogaming's history?
I think it's important that game designers have an appreciation of it, although whether players should – well, I don't expect somebody who goes to see a film today to have an appreciation of Citizen Kane, but I would expect the person making a film today to appreciate it. The whole thing of telling a story in a game is something of a lost craft. There's this wealth of information that we figured out at Sierra, Lucasfilm, the other developers doing this kind of stuff... It's not that I think designers today should be making adventure games, but even a game like *Half-Life* – if they had a better understanding of puzzle structure, it would be so easy to have made the narrative flow through the interaction a little bit better.

How about appreciation of history among publishers? Electronic Arts and LucasArts – Lucasfilm at the time
I can't even call it LucasArts [laughs]. It's Lucasfilm.

Both publishers were founded on enormously creative output, but now seem to have little interest in games with the resonance of their back catalogue.
It was really starting to happen at Lucasfilm as I left, and I wasn't there to see it, but my guess is you can blame Star Wars. The Star Wars games just sold so well that they dwarfed everything else, and it didn't make sense to be putting money behind other games: even though they might have been profitable, why waste resources when you could make ten times as much money with a Star Wars licence?

Do you think it's the money that has turned EA away from a developer-focused stance to a franchise-led one?
In some ways you can attribute that to a lack of vision. I think Trip Hawkins started Electronic Arts with a real vision: he was an interesting guy, a gamer, but also a very good businessman. And he combined those two talents to build a very successful company. I've never met Larry Probst, but does he have a vision for *games*, or a vision for his game business? It would be nice if somebody in these publishers had a vision for what games should be, and understood enough about business to make that a viable business.

But I think it will change. I think it has to. The movie business went through the same phases and they've now struck an interesting balance between the artistic part and the business part. I don't think there's any doubt that movies are art, but for a lot of people games are toys. When society decides that something is art, like movies, it's a little easier to reach that balance: the movie industry knows they have to do summer blockbusters where they make a lot of their money, but they also know to appeal to all these other people that can be drawn in to watching movies, even if they don't provide the bulk of the profit. The games business hasn't figured that out yet, and so it makes nothing but blockbusters. They haven't understood that there's actually a much larger audience out there, and I would love to see a publisher – especially a big one like EA – start a separate division with a focus of creating games that cost less than $4 million to make. If it costs more you kick it up to EA, otherwise you let this little studio do it.



Capcom took this approach, forming a splinter original concept studio.
Exactly. I'm not expecting to do 'art games' that aren't going to make money – I'm a firm believer in making money. But I don't think you have to be so obsessed with it that you have to make $50 million or not be interested. That's what the publishers don't understand.

Why do you think the message of reaching a broader audience with different games isn't registering, even with developers like Will Wright proving its success?
I have no idea. My guess is that a lot of publishers are run by their marketing departments. I've met some brilliant marketing people, but there are so many marketing departments where everything is cookie-cutter, and very focused on what sold last year and wanting more of that. Marketing is incredibly important – I don't want to belittle it at all, as without it you're dead – but from my experience pitching my game around, that's where the problem is. The number one excuse I hear back is, 'Well, we ran it by marketing, and marketing felt it was too much like some other game that didn't do well'.



Is that something independent studios can avoid?
It's free from the traditional boxed marketing, but it still needs marketing. If you look at a lot of the independent games – if you go to their websites, you'll see that they don't get it: they may have a good game, but they don't have a good web page that entices you to download it. There's an old saying in marketing that half of the job is getting someone to pick the box up off the shelf – the independents need to design their websites so that if you click deeper in, they're halfway to getting you to download the game. They need to really understand marketing.

The problem with the independent game business, as opposed to the independent film business, is that we don't have a structure to finance independent games – there isn't a Sundance, angel investors, all those mechanisms for funding. I've really scratched and clawed to try to find it, but I ended up going completely outside the industry. It's too bad it's not more available.

"The problem with the independent game business, as opposed to the independent film business, is we don't have structure to finance independent games"

Recently we've seen smaller publishers taking a chance on funding original projects, like Majesco with *Psychonauts* – do you see that continuing?
I've been very impressed with Majesco: they've done an amazing job on the marketing and PR for *Psychonauts*. But the curse is getting a mainstream product that does incredibly well and then that's all you want to do any more. Ubisoft seemed to be this company that everyone held up as doing wonderful, different stuff, artistic stuff, and then they got the Tom Clancy licence, the money starts rolling in, and now they just want to do licences.

So I hope Majesco can get some products that make them a ton of money, but I also hope they never forget *Psychonauts* and the other artistically interesting games.

On the subject of Ubisoft, you've previously said you felt it should have continued the *Beyond Good & Evil* trilogy rather than dropping it.
The thing about *BG&E* is that it had mediocre sales, but there were people who *loved* the game. If you have a situation where you're getting a lot of grassroots buzz about a game but it doesn't sell well, then I think you build a sequel, and you go yell at your marketing and sales people that they should have done a better job. That's what I would have done: I would have said we've got something here, maybe we made some mistakes in development, some things we did wrong in the marketing, but there are people who really like it, so let's fix the issues and get it out there again.

Do you feel the next-gen consoles' demands for larger teams and larger budgets will mean publishers are less likely to support cult successes, though?
That's why in a way I'm a lot more interested in the PC market, although the wonderful thing about console games is that they're played in the living room – that's where we go to be entertained, to watch television, to listen to our stereo, and that's where we should be getting our interactive entertainment. But I don't like the control the hardware manufacturers have over content. Even if I had my own money, I couldn't make my game on the next-gen Xbox, because Microsoft wouldn't let me. And the retailers, at least in the US, are the other part of the problem. Publishers go to retailers and present all the games they have in development, and if the retailers don't like one there's a good chance that game will be killed.

On PC, nobody gets to tell me what I can make, and the internet is the future of that kind of distribution, especially if you're doing a game that's a little bit different. Contrary to popular belief, it's really not cheaper – bandwidth is expensive – but it gets the retailers out of the loop, so your game can't be cancelled because some guy at Wal-Mart didn't like it.



Gilbert began his videogame industry career at HESware, before joining Lucasfilm Games, where his first responsibilities involved converting Atari 800 titles for the Commodore 64. Later, he worked on realtime strategy game *Total Annihilation* (above) at now-defunct developer Cavedog Entertainment

Despite the divide between console and PC, do you not feel that the spirit of the adventure game has been continued in console genres like survival horror?
They have the skeleton of the adventure game, but what they don't have is all the stuff that fleshes it out. Adventure games have what we called 'plot-point puzzles' that move the story forward. Games like *Resident Evil* have those, but they don't have all the puzzles that lead you up to the plot points, that finesse you through the game and build up the sense of what the world is. The consoles have co-opted the plot puzzle at the cost of the other things that really make adventure games.

I don't think a lot of games nowadays have stories – they have excuses for missions, which people call storytelling, but I don't think it is. They say it's cinematic, but in a movie there isn't one story, there's lots of stories, from all the different characters and their needs and desires. That's what gives a story depth, when it stops just being a caricature, and it's

probably one of the reasons something like *Monkey Island* – which is going to be 15 years old in a few months – still has fans obsessed with its world. It wasn't five plot puzzles interspersed with combat levels, it was a world with a story inside it.

When we spoke to Brian Fargo about these issues, he felt that just displaying a tangible humanity was the biggest massmarket draw possible.

I'd absolutely agree with that. All great stories are a reflection on us, and more importantly a mirror that the reader or the viewer can see themselves in, in some way. And I think games totally miss that. It could get us a lot more players, because you reach beyond the hardcore market, and it allows a lot more longevity because people can really feel a part of it.

Is there a difference between 'interactive storytelling' and the notion of letting players identify with a linear story?

Yeah, I have really strong views about this, and a lot of people do not agree with me [laughs]. But I don't believe stories should be interactive. I believe stories should be *participatory*. This whole notion that you can go into a story and make it anything you want it to be, or that there's ten different endings, I think is just crap. A really good 'interactive story' is like taking a trip down the rapids: we're going to get in this raft, and we're starting here and we're going to end here, but how you navigate the rapids – that's the participatory part. You're participating in my story, but you're not going to change it, because it's *my* story. I have a story to tell you.

Multiple endings seem to have become a required feature for current narrative-driven games.

It's a bulletpoint on a box: at the end of the day, what you get is one good story with nine crappy endings. What I'd rather have is one really, really good ending and let's just forget about the others, because they're not going to be as satisfying.

At its core, a story is a depiction of some human experience, about teaching us something, and to let the computer pick the ending based on what's happened – well, I'm sure my PC could tell my Mac interesting stories, but it can't tell me interesting stories. I mean, even look at [*World Of*] *WarCraft* – you can come out of *WarCraft* with great little stories, but how many hours did you play it for when nothing happened? It's like going to a sporting event – they play 170 games of baseball a year, and two or three of those games are *brilliant* stories, but the other 167 are just a sequence of events. And I think interactive storytelling can end up being that – there's some gems that you can talk about for years, but a story isn't just a series of events. It's a series of events with a purpose.

"This whole notion that you can go into a story and make it anything you want it to be, or that there's ten different endings, I think is just crap"

Can every game benefit from a story?

No. We had a little get-together with a bunch of designers who focus on stories, and we talked about this every year. Does *Tetris* need a story? No, of course not. And then one guy raises his hand and says: "I disagree. Whenever I play *Tetris* I imagine I'm a prisoner in a Russian gulag, building with these bricks," and we were like, OK, maybe you can pull a story out of everything. But you play a lot of games without a story. We play *Burnout 2* all the time, and it's a better game for lack of a story: it doesn't try to tell us that we're street racers going for our colours, it's just: 'Get in your car and race'. You never know why you're doing it, they never explain to





you why you're trying to create the biggest accident you can – it would have been destroyed by a story.

And yet that's exactly what was layered on to it in *Burnout 3*.
Which we absolutely hated [laughs]. It was like watching a marketing department in overdrive. I think *Burnout 3* was way overproduced, and a good example of EA's bad influence on games, where they come in from a very corporate standpoint and completely overproduce something.

Is it this climate that's driven you to take the independent approach with the game you're developing?
Really, I've spent more of my creative energy rewriting documents in order to convince publishers of things than I have on writing the game. It's actually very new for me – at Lucasfilm my biggest job was to get the other designers and programmers behind my game, and then management would okay it. And of course at Humongous we were a publisher, so that was an internal process.

So going out and pitching to publishers has been frustrating, and that's what made me decide to figure out an independent financing route for this game. My goal is to make it for a third of what a lot of PC games are being made for, come up with a really interesting art style and direction, and put together a team of 10-15 people for it. I love the synergy we had on the small teams, where everyone contributed, and everybody on the team can point to something and say: "That's my idea." And I'll be honest, it's not going to be a mega-hit, but it's going to make money.

Do you think it's a viable approach?
It's viable. It's a lot of work to find independent funding, but God knows there's enough fanatic *Monkey Island* fans out there and one of them's got to have made some money [laughs]. No, I have a bunch of good leads for financing, so I'm optimistic – it's not going to happen fast, but I would hope within the next year I'll be ready to start on something.

So you're grumpy, but not out.
I just refuse to go away. There's so many days when I wake up and think I'm quitting, I'm never going to do this again, but I just can't. Getting this game made has become an obsession now, that I'm going to make it and show everybody *something* – either that I was right or I was wrong, but something. I love this business because I feel like I've been in it since the beginning. When I started, people sold games on floppy discs in Ziploc baggies, and I feel like I know this business and can't imagine myself doing much else. It's a fascinating business – we're going through these very interesting times, we're still struggling with the artistic nature of it all, production issues, coming up against the immaturity of the industry... I'm sure we'll look back on it 20, 30 years from now and laugh, but right now it's kind of neat to be a part of it.





A WORLD APART

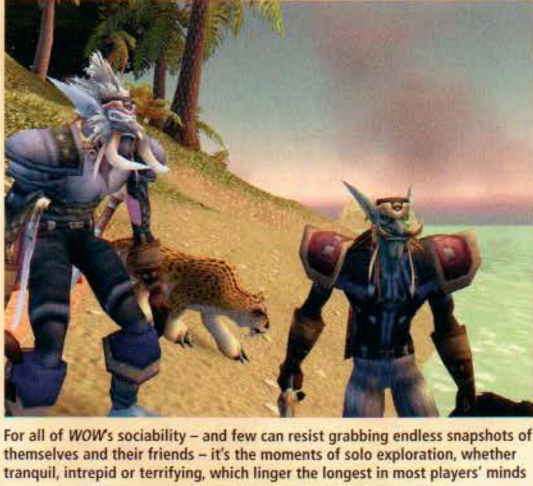
World Of WarCraft has become a real phenomenon. To find out why, we go straight to the source of its success: the players

In March of this year, Blizzard announced that its online roleplaying game, *World Of WarCraft*, had amassed 1.5 million subscriptions. That's close to three times the highest global totals ever claimed for *EverQuest*, the first heavyweight champion of subscription-based, massively multiplayer gaming, or *Final Fantasy XI*, *WOW*'s closest current rival; five times the estimated population of its contemporary, *EverQuest 2*; six times the peak userbase achieved by long-running genre stalwart *Ultima Online*. Granted, that number is still dwarfed by the several millions of players claimed for South Korea's national obsession, NCSoft's *Lineage* games, but even if allowances are made for the rose tint of corporate press releases, and a hefty pinch of salt applied, the numbers are so stark they ring with a simple, inescapable truth: *WOW* is a phenomenon. And at £8.99 a month, it's a £150-million-a-year phenomenon.

It's the speed with which the game has established itself that's truly awe-inspiring. As the market for MMOs matured, sequels launched and big entertainment brands such as Star Wars (with Sony Online Entertainment's *Galaxies*) and *Final Fantasy* entered the fray, the steady accumulation of subscribers to each title has become an increasingly rapid stampede. But there is still no precedent for *WOW*'s explosive arrival on the scene. It took *EverQuest* five years to climb to the half-million mark. *Final Fantasy XI* did it in two. *WOW* reached 500,000 active subscriptions – in Europe alone – a mere two months after its release in the region.

There's undoubtedly been some migration from older games: *EverQuest*, *Ultima Online* and *Dark Age Of Camelot* all appear to have experienced sharp dips in subscription numbers over the last six months. But even if *WOW* didn't





For all of *WOW*'s sociability – and few can resist grabbing endless snapshots of themselves and their friends – it's the moments of solo exploration, whether tranquil, intrepid or terrifying, which linger the longest in most players' minds





While some accuse *WOW*'s graphical style of being at the over-egged end of clichéd high-fantasy, the sense of place – of luminous, hazy caverns and sharp starlit nights – is immense

have *EverQuest 2* and other partners in this crime of player theft, these few tens of thousands wouldn't explain its skyrocketing popularity. On paper, it seems *WOW* is expanding the market for MMOs almost by the day, introducing thousands of virgin players to a kind of gaming that is certainly not new, but just as certainly very different to anything they've experienced before. Where did these players come from? Why are they coming now? Why choose *WOW*? And just what is it that they're doing there?

You could search for, and most likely find, some answers to these questions in a sober, top-down, demographic study. But the deeply personal and social nature of the MMO experience – the very nature that makes it so fascinating to academics and amateur virtual world watchers – also makes its curious, compulsive, utterly subjective appeal impossible to map from above. If you want to hear the heartbeat that powers *WarCraft*'s world, you need to press your ear to the ground. You need to look at it from the bottom up, starting with what's in front of you: one European server; one faction; one friends list; one guild – a handful of players, friends and strangers, some dedicated, some jaded, some casual, some obsessed. A tiny backwater in *WOW*'s grand scheme of things; but in MMOs, especially this one, every backwater is a world unto itself.

"The only thing I'd experienced of MMOs before *WOW* was reading about people getting married in *EverQuest* and thinking: 'Nerds'." Barry, a web developer, is a fairly typical member of the guild in this respect. Back in January he had no experience of massively multiplayer online worlds. Now, after countless hours of play, his character, a deceptively frail-looking female warlock of the Undead race, has reached the maximum level of 60 and is making a name for herself on the server for the enchantments she sells.

Anecdotal evidence backs up what the statistics suggest. Only a handful of the 40-odd players in the guild have played MMOs before; of those, four started fairly recently on *Final Fantasy XI*, and just one is a veteran of *Ultima* vintage. "I'd say that 90 per cent of the people I play with have never touched an MMO before," agrees Barry. "And most of those are playing because people they knew had told them how great it was." This word-of-mouth has been by far the most powerful weapon in Blizzard's marketing battery, and had plenty of chance to gather steam during the unusually large-scale and high-profile public beta tests.

Most players will admit to curiosity about the genre being a contributing factor in taking the plunge, but a sizeable minority had no such intention; they were purely and simply talked into it, without quite knowing what it was they were being talked into. Ian (a level 55 Undead Warlock with 610 hours played), who works in sales, was persuaded to try *WOW* by his longtime friend and gaming partner Dom (a level 54 Tauren Druid, 516 hours played). "I didn't realise the amount of commitment an MMO needs," he says, noting sadly that the staff at his local have forgotten what his usual is. But he rose to the challenge, and doesn't regret it. "I think all other games now pale in comparison," he states.

There is one other online RPG that the guildmates do mention time and again, although it can't be classified as massively multiplayer. "The last game to completely dominate my gaming life because of its online functionality was *Phantasy Star Online*," says Bruce (a lapsed level 33 Troll Rogue with 160 hours played), a PR accounts manager. "*PSO* created a bond that seemed stronger than it should have been. I don't know if it was the fact that we had saved each other's lives so often, or simply that we'd found other people who stayed awake until 3am on a weeknight, but whatever it was it was special. Then *PSO* ended and we looked for the 'next *PSO*'. *WOW*, I suppose, was it."

That *WOW* players are just as (if not more) likely to namecheck Sega's trailblazing console game as *Neverwinter Nights* or *Diablo* is a crucial clue. If they aren't MMO adepts, they are also not PC gamers. MMOs were previously most often the preserve of a specialised subset of the most hobbyist breed of gamer, a community within a community



WOW's character-creation tool is far from exhuastive, but between the Alliance and Horde races, the two genders, various professions and thousands of equipment combinations, each player can create a feeling of uniqueness



WOW's world is vast, and travel times can add up to serious commutes. Unquestionably inconvenient when trying to meet up with friends, it adds a powerful sense of scale to the world, and real value to the few Zeppelin routes

A crafted war

There are two factions in the game: the clean-cut Alliance races, and roguish Horde (to which the guild belongs, and whose players paradoxically seem the more community-minded and easygoing). It's an uncompromising, total divide of the game's population – not just grouping, but even basic communication between players of the other faction is impossible in-game. Conversely, combat (other than 'friendly' duels) can only take place between opposing sides.

It's a tough restriction that frustrates some players, seduced as they are by the sheer freedom of the MMO format. Says Ryan: "I'd like to be able to sit down and talk to, if not to everyone, then at least some of our 'enemies'. Maybe open a Horde Embassy in the Alliance capital Stormwind while I'm at it, but I guess that's never going to be an option!" Balance is also a major problem, notes Nick. "The Alliance is just far more popular, with a three-to-one numerical advantage. Such a one-sided contest makes the PvP pretty unrewarding."

However, the tension and immersion this schism adds to the game's atmosphere is considerable, whether it manifests in antagonism, light-hearted rivalry or halting, gestured attempts to make friends across the divide. It's the most irresistible spur to actual roleplaying in the game. "I feel a solidarity with the Horde that stems from being outnumbered," says Ben. "I've built up a genuine but still good-willed dislike for the Alliance, partly because I have an irrational hatred for Dwarves and want them all dead."

within a community. Blizzard, despite its lack of experience in the console market, has somehow lured the great unwashed from sofa to desk, and *WOW* is displacing *Halo 2*, *Resident Evil 4* and *San Andreas* in their hearts. Perhaps it was luck or perhaps it was judgement, but either way, it was nothing if not impeccable timing.

Richard (a level 25 Tauren Hunter with 94 hours played), a software developer who considers his gaming tastes to be fairly mainstream and one of the lighter, lower-level players in the guild, is the perfect example. "I had recently acquired a high-spec PC as it was the only gaming platform of which I hadn't previously taken advantage. Plus, I'm a graphics whore, and if you spend enough money on a PC it's the best platform for graphics. My intentions were to play *Far Cry*, *Doom 3* and *Half-Life 2*, and to get into MMOs." *WOW* found itself surfing a swell of interest in PC gaming, as these blockbuster titles combined with technology that was leaving ageing consoles in its wake.

What happened then – when a highly polished, socially driven game met an eager new audience unburdened by preconceptions in a technologically ripe environment – was an infectious explosion of excited discovery. In the guild, it took someone with a little perspective to see what was happening: Dan (a level 26 Tauren Hunter with 72 hours played) is a project manager who has now left the game. He recognises *WOW*'s merit, but will never prefer it to his first love in the genre: "I believe that your first MMORPG is the one that defines your feelings for them, and mine was *FFXI*... It was beautiful, exciting, involving... every meeting was special, every group interesting. Speaking to friends for whom *WOW* is their first MMO, I can hear that same feeling."

Combined with already unprecedented player numbers, the effect was to intensify the atmosphere of the game, stimulating word-of-mouth to the extent that rampant demand overwhelmed the US servers at launch. Blizzard and its publisher Vivendi had to hold copies off European shelves for months



while its infrastructure caught up. The ripple effect was unstoppable. "When a few people I knew said it was amazing, and I knew that I'd be able to play with them, I bought it," says Barry. "Now due to me blabbering on about it at work, one of my colleagues has bought it and loves it. And the guy who sits next to me is thinking of buying a new PC just to play *WOW*." Dan puts it more simply: "I think it's a positive-feedback situation: the more people play, the more people play." True, in every sense.

However much it fed off itself, such a sensational response had to be responding to something. However timely its release and receptive the market, there has to be something quantitatively or qualitatively different about *WOW* that's fulfilling players in a way other MMOs, or indeed other species of game, are not. Something not just to draw them in, but to keep them there, for hour after hour and month after week. At a time when much of the industry is concerned with its inability to produce games that most players will want – and be able – to finish, how does *WOW* keep people playing for hundreds of hours, and paying month after month for the privilege?

One of its tricks is simple: "If you get stuck on something, there's almost always something else you can do instead," states IT technician Ryan (a level 53 Undead Warlock with 432 hours played). "There's just so much to do," agrees Steve (level 60 Orc Shaman with 612 hours played), an operations coordinator who often plays with his two housemates, usually in the same room. "If I don't like one area I can go to another, or battle through an instance" – an instance is a dungeon, designed for private group play, where it's impossible to encounter players outside your party – "or help out some friends, or just explore. I love to explore."

"Or some cooking," adds Ryan, "fishing, clothes making, finding the perfect sunset... anything." The professions, such as mining, alchemy, skinning and enchantment, allow players to make and modify items to use, trade or sell. They offer an immensely involved sidetrack to adventuring and combat-focused character development, and drive a lot of player interaction. Whenever there's a lull, or a hint of frustration, players turn to self-imposed quests which can take hours of effort for an inconsequential – but irresistible – gain, like a pet mechanical squirrel or the perfect purple shirt.

There are so many options and avenues it's virtually impossible to get stuck, and virtually impossible to play and not make some kind of incremental progress. Experience points, cash and items come in a steady stream from every monster killed, as well as far more innocuous activities. "In *FFXI*," says Deepesh (level 60 Undead Rogue, 386 hours played), an IT manager who much prefers *WOW*, "you could farm away for hours and really get nothing out of it, while in *WOW* you are guaranteed some sort of gain."



The quality of the character design isn't limited to player avatars. NPCs often convey more personality in their appearance than they do in their quest-triggering speeches. Higher level eneimies are also spectacular, leading to uneccesary deaths as players scrabble for a screenshot instead of running away

At a time when much of the industry is concerned with its inability to produce games that most players will want – and be able – to finish, how does WOW keep people playing?

Clever design and sheer wealth of content contribute to making *WOW* such an unfettered distraction; but above all else, it's enabled by the game's most controversial and radical departure from the MMO template: the extreme ease of solo play. The majority of players spend half or more of their time playing alone. The huge majority of quests can be successfully completed alone, giving the individual player much more freedom to follow their whims and shape the time they spend in the gameworld, and giving group play more elasticity. "That there is no distinction between solo and group quests is one of the best things about the game – if there's a tough quest you can call for help, or follow a whole chain through with people joining and leaving as they wish," says graphic designer Sam (a level 47 Troll Hunter, 372 hours played). This process also makes it easier to be selective in your company,





***WOW* runs on a real day-and-night cycle, meaning that many weeknight players only get to play after dark. Seeing dawn break over a new area can transform your impression of the landscape – it makes squeezing in a pre-work session seem almost justifiable**





Although many of *WOW*'s players are oblivious to the narrative heritage the game builds on, many do pick up on the continuity it brings to the environments. Nothing feels arbitrarily added just to look pretty – details have integrity and a real sense of history

always a contentious issue in online gaming. Although the appeal of MMOs is often explained in terms of their sociability, what's often overlooked is how antisocial and awkward much of the interaction between players can be. Ask someone to explain the highs and lows of *WOW* and, like Steve, they may only need a single answer: "I like the people the best, and I dislike the people the most."

This level of choice has perhaps been one of *WOW*'s most valuable weapons in attracting and retaining newcomers to the genre. If the stresses of online play become annoying or overwhelming, players can take refuge in a mode of play which is far closer to their usual gaming experiences. "I've probably enjoyed solo playing more," says Barry. "I think it's the sense of being out there on your own with nobody to help you that makes it more enjoyable. If something goes wrong, then it's down to your skills and abilities to sort it out; you can't rely on someone else to come and help you."

WOW has clearly been structured to be easy to enjoy, but the reputation MMOs have as a rather obsessive-compulsive form of entertainment still clings to it. Another Sam, a student (and a lapsed level 26 Troll Priest with 60 hours played), is blunt about the subject: "*WOW* has a weird kind of



The world's huge capital cities are awesome structures, regularly leaving low-level players gobsmacked the first time they see them

enjoyment – it's more of a habit or addiction. I never got excited about playing the game itself, but more about reaching the next level. It's more like a job that you don't get paid for than a game." It's a harsh statement from a disillusioned player, but almost everyone experiences spells of play where the goal matters far more than the repetitive route to it. It should be exactly the kind of dynamic which alienates this new demographic of console gamers more used to instant gratification. But, in *WOW*, Blizzard has found a way to balance the frustration of the process with the allure of its reward. Mark (a level 60 Tauren Warrior with 737 hours played), who works in TV, recalls killing a certain kind of high-level enemy 500 times in the hope it would drop a rare and extremely lucrative blueprint: "It's a bit like being locked in a disused newsagents for 12 hours at a time, with nothing but scratchcards to keep you company. Hideous, but strangely compelling."

When asked to pinpoint what's kept them involved in the game, many cite the combat, which whether against other players or environmental enemies constitutes the meat of *WOW*'s gameplay. But it's noticeable that they will either invoke its emotional side – be it the comradeship of group play, or the nail-biting fervour of PvP – or the extreme level of customisation and refinement available in their characters' combat abilities, an absorbing numbers game that nonetheless only brings fractional change to everyday play. You won't find many making claims for its variety or tactical sophistication. To Bruce it's "ultra-repetitive," while Gary (a level 41 Undead Mage, 184 hours played), an illustrator – and genuine fan – calls it "chaotic snakes and ladders." And no one has anything but scorn for the one-note, kill-racking nature of what Ian calls the "bread-and-butter" quests.

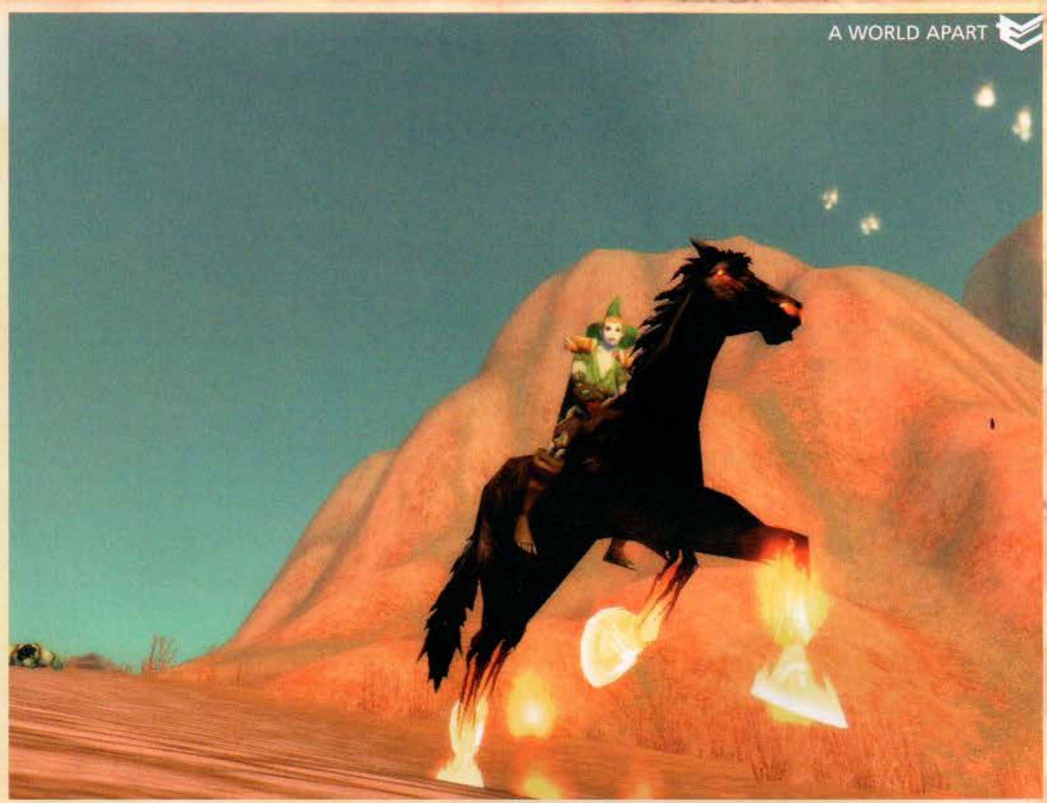
In pure gameplay terms, most agree that *WOW* is some distance from perfect. Which doesn't explain why a player like Barry feels that "everything else just seems lacking now. It's such an odd thing to say, I'd regularly buy games, but now I just think: 'Mmm, not as good as *WOW*'." The answer, in fact, is quite plain. On its central attraction, everyone in the guild is unanimous; the raw substance of *WOW* is just as its title implies – the world, not what you do in it. The sheer, overpowering, breathtaking size and beauty of it; the complete absence of arbitrary impediments to free movement around it. Exploring virtual space has been a powerful impulse in videogames since their invention, but ever more so in the 3D era, and some would say that *WOW* takes it to a new level.

"I love the enormous map," says Richard, "exploring, climbing, seeing new things for the first



Although each race has a natural predisposition to a particular craft, many choose to go against the grain. Gaining enough skill to create the high-end items takes a huge amount of perseverance – and often a lot of cooperation – but the pride players find in their creations makes it all worthwhile


Due to *WOW*'s vast maps, gaining a speedy mount is the game's biggest rite of passage, requiring plentiful experience and money


Although the ordinary mounts earned by players are spectacular enough, many set their hearts on rare 'epic' mounts, which are gained either by undertaking truly outrageous quests or by amassing a staggering amount of money. Devoted players can even earn the right to ride other races' mounts

time. I love that I can just keep running and running and running. I've no idea how it compares to San Andreas in size but it feels 20 times bigger." It's a singular creation, one that inspires wonder, even when, like Barry, you've been living there for months: "I've constantly been amazed with the scenery and enemies since day one. I get the same feelings seeing great big dragons flying over my head in one of the level 60 areas as I did when I first set foot in the Barrens and saw a herd of gazelles run past me." Ask a player for the moment that has defined *WOW* for them, and you're less likely to hear a tale of daring and combat expertise than of the discovery of a playful holiday retreat in the mountains, or of a swim down the entire cost of one continent, or of a first aerial view of the world.

It's this sense of place which is profoundly irresistible. Although many players become frustrated with the time spent trudging from place to place, few would be without the sense of eager anticipation as they emerge from the gloom of a mountain pass into a new landscape – whether it's the silvery savannahs of the Barrens, the alpine freshness of Loch Modan or the choking mists of Dustwallow Marsh. The game's music, too, plays a vital role in this sense of place, as new melodies thread their way into players' consciousnesses.

But even when offered a world this vibrant, some wanted more. "I imagined the world would be constantly evolving, with the Horde gradually achieving things, or failing to achieve them, and the politics of the world dictating new priorities," says Richard. It's this that surprises many players new to MMOs. Every last-gasp rescue or dragon-slaying epic has been done before, and will be done hundreds of times again. Nothing changes in the world due to your actions; nothing has any lasting effect.

But if it's not a persistent world, it is an entirely consistent one, something born from the extraordinarily rich heritage which Blizzard has to draw on. Even though many of its players are oblivious to the significance of the places and peoples of the *WarCraft* universe, its coherence adds a solidity that everyone appreciates. Most players don't stop to think about the whispers that catch at the edge of your hearing as they enter the ruins of Lordaeron, and most don't stop to notice the scatter of faded rose petals at their feet, but their combined effect conveys to even the most oblivious that something truly awful and truly tragic happened here. Those who know their *WarCraft* history can pause a moment in the throne room, strain their ears and hear, buried deep below the ambient soundtrack, the echoes of a cut-scene that few Blizzard veterans can forget – a son driven mad, a father killed and a city destroyed.

Ask a player for the moment that has defined WOW for them, and you're less likely to hear a tale of daring and combat expertise than of the discovery of a playful holiday retreat in the mountains

That same level of detail is in every aspect of the game, from incidental intricacies of architecture to the range of clothing and the quest-givers' flowery speeches. And it's this, along with the beauty of the environment and the liveliness of an unpredictable world, that is unquestionably what has made *WarCraft*'s world so consuming for so many. It's what can transform any moment of unremarkable, makework solo play into an indelible memory.

"Right at the very beginning, when I was level 1 and first walked in to the starting area, I talked to an NPC and he gave me my first quest," reminisces Barry. "'Go and talk to X in the church down the hill'. I must have spent about ten minutes looking for that church before I finally plucked up the courage to ask for help from a level 4 player (amazing at the time). I asked them where it was, and they just pointed at me. I asked again and they pointed again. I turned round and I was stood in front of a big church. I felt stupid, so thanked them and ran off.

"But I also thought, 'This game is amazing'. And I still do."

Server versus server

The guild inhabits a 'normal' server, where player-versus-player combat can only take place with the consent of both parties. There are two other varieties: PvP servers, where there are no such restrictions, and roleplaying, where the rules are similar to normal servers but players are expected to behave in character, collectively suspending disbelief.

Normal servers are ostensibly the most accessible to novices, although in practice, the roleplaying experience is scarcely any different. "The RP servers would be more interesting if everybody did actually roleplay," says Gary, who has an alternative character in one of these environments, "but too few people can keep this up for any length of time." It seems there are limits to most players' desire to escape into a virtual world, and any curtailment of their self-expression is one of them.

PvP servers are very popular, however, and Dan, who has tried this play style, is impressed by its emotional intensity. "Meeting someone you can attack for the first time and knowing they're a real person somewhere raises hairs on your neck like nothing else. It's like a different game. Once the honour system [a PvP points system] came in, it was hell out there. The constant thrill and danger of PvP gave so much to the game, I would be reticent to play normal if I went back." On normal servers, inter-player combat mostly becomes a pursuit for the highest-level players, says Richard. "I feel like I can never turn my PvP on until I'm at least level 55. There's no point, I'll just be dead."

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Now playing

Lumines



A post-E3 drought for PSP, you say? Nothing to do but strive for that 999,999-point ceiling and the innermost skins of Q's entrancing puzzler? Terrible. Just terrible.
PSP, BANDAI

Sid Meier's Pirates



Opening salvos, boarding actions and the tearing of cloth both on and off the waves – but even the most trigger-happy buccaneer should be prepared for being sunk.
PC, ATARI

Forza Motorsport



Not the racing, of course. Why bother with that when there's this much design work to be done? Not since *PSO*'s icons has so much been got out of squares, circles and lines.
XBOX, MICROSOFT

The substance of style
Do we want bling and bang for our buck?



Games like *Psychonauts* and *Killer 7*, although they feature solid but unremarkable gameplay, are elevated by their visual style and emotional sophistication. But is this something to applaud?

After the initial wow factor of *Killer 7* had worn off – and as the game's release slipped further and further back the release schedules – you began to hear the growing rustle of sceptical heads shaking. "There's no game there," they reckoned. "It's all style, no substance."

For many, it's the worst insult you can throw at the game. Worse than incompetence, it's a kind of fraud, an attempt to dazzle players into buying a worthless, empty trinket. And to try to pull that kind of trick on the committed, well-informed players who form the core of these games' audience isn't just a fraud, it's an insult. "You really think we won't notice?"

But this understandable wariness can also be damaging. It reinforces an idea which is one of the things holding games back: that style and substance are separate, different things. All the non-mechanical aspects of a game – visual style, dialogue, soundscape, atmosphere, characterisation – change the context of your in-game actions. And games can no longer be – if they ever should have been – rated on the basis that 90 per cent for visuals + 50 per cent for gameplay = 70 per cent. Nor, as some might prefer, 90 per cent for visuals + 50 per cent for gameplay = 50 per cent.

In a game like *Killer 7* it's impossible to separate style and substance. The on-rails control scheme is weirdly and intrinsically appropriate to a journey that is one part Saturday morning cartoon, one part film noir and one part psychotic hallucination. The system of checkpoints and saves may be built on familiar principles, but as you discover more about Samantha – the savepoint guardian – and her abusive, dependent relationship with Harman, it becomes impossible to view them as mere gameplay furniture.

It may even be that the more radical the styling, the wiser it is for the gameplay not to break too many moulds – with so much for your eyes and ears to take in, do you really want to be straining your brain to take in something as intricate and challenging as *Remote Control Dandy SF*'s one-leg-at-a-time, every-button-on-the-pad control scheme? Then again, maybe you would: the sad fact is that we simply don't get enough of either type of game to judge what it would be like if they cross-bred. Other than wonderful.

Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



KILLER 7

FORMAT: GC (VERSION TESTED), PS2 PRICE: £40
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JPN), JULY 6 (US), JULY 15 (UK) PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE/CAPCOM



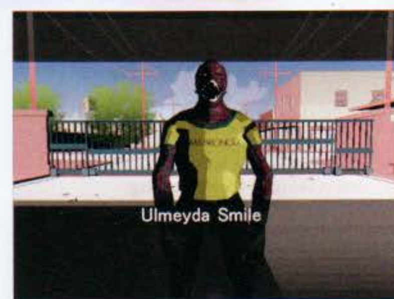


One of the game's setbacks comes when a Smith dies, requiring underpowered 'cleaner' Garcian to retrieve the corpse for resuscitation, then starting them from the last checkpoint. Often, it's more convenient to load the last save file, but that's only possible after resetting the console or reaching the game over screen

With so much of this year's E3 being taken up by that multiformat double-act of Smoke and Mirrors, and with so many bids being put in on the next-gen limelight, it's perhaps apt to think about who occupies that spotlight at present. And it's just as apt to think it will be Capcom, thanks to the high points of its output over the past year. From *Resident Evil 4*'s brutal action-supercharged progression of survival horror to the bulldozing bullets'n'blades choreography of *Devil May Cry 3* – and, to a lesser extent, the bloodthirsty riots of *Shadow Of Rome* – the fading floodlight of the current generation looks set to be a twilight that belongs to Capcom.

And still the developer has further cards up its sleeve – such as the prospective ace that is *Okami*, and its restless beauty – but in Capcom's evidently winning hand there's also something wilder: *Killer 7*. It's a game with such a wealth of bizarre personality that very little of it could be fathomed through the peephole of previews, but the game itself, however late and cloaked until now, is something solidly real. For all the barmy charm and character that drools from the plot, as elite assassin Harman Smith employs his multiple 'Killer 7' troupe of personalities to rid a world of a horrific terrorist operation, there's a neat and definite structure in place. It's a vivid, lightgun-like shooter, set within the recognisable action-adventure framework of exploration and to-and-fro puzzling. But it's the gunplay that's the game's heart: requiring a switch from third- to firstperson, confrontations take place against clusters of ghoulish Heaven Smile terrorists – walking bombs who come in a hideous range of shapes, sizes and weak spots – with the player flicking the C-stick to reload their weapon. There's a fair amount of strategy to be savoured, both through the range of personalities and their unique styles of attack, and the surreal menageries of enemies they face, but it's one that demands to be played well, or else it sags into the realm of frustration and repetition.





There's a wild variety in the forms of your Heaven Smile opponents. The unflinching Laser Smile has to be hit in the neck the very moment it preps a deadly blast to fire at the player, for example. Other colourful opponents include Mithril, Phantom, Spiral, Broken and Diver Smiles

> It's a game with such a wealth of bizarre personality that very little of it could be fathomed through the peephole of previews

Killer 7 is a harsh learning experience, and its opening mission is a litmus test that leads to deep satisfaction for those who gel with its sharpshooting confrontations and its magnificent, uncompromising look. But it's also a game where style and substance are hard to separate, and experiencing it may well involve treading a thin line between admiration and enjoyment; basking in the perturbed and twisted style is half of the substance that *Killer 7* has to offer. Visually, it's immaculate and often astonishing, with each mission throwing up a fresh new vision and atmosphere, along with numerous demented environmental highlights.

It happily trades freedom of character movement for grandeur, too, with its fixed camera angles doing their best to glamorise the game's stark and alarming appearance. It means that anyone left irritated by *Resident Evil 4*'s ostensibly limited control scheme will feel doubly duped here, but *Killer 7*'s on-rails character movement – hold A to run along a predetermined path, tap B to turn around – is a smooth and efficient method of exploration, once accepted. As a shooting gallery, it has accuracy and flexibility and room for flamboyance, even if it can't quite pip the thunderous crowd-control of *Resident Evil 4*'s combat. A lock-on is

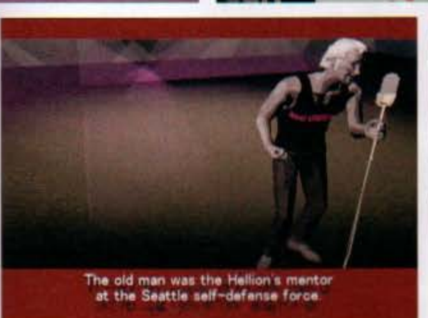


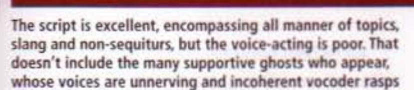
The boss encounters are suitably memorable and atypical, and rarely come down to repetitive battles of attrition. Figuring out just how to tackle a scenario – such as having to snipe the hidden brains of two dead businessmen through their shattered skulls – is often trickier than performing the kill itself













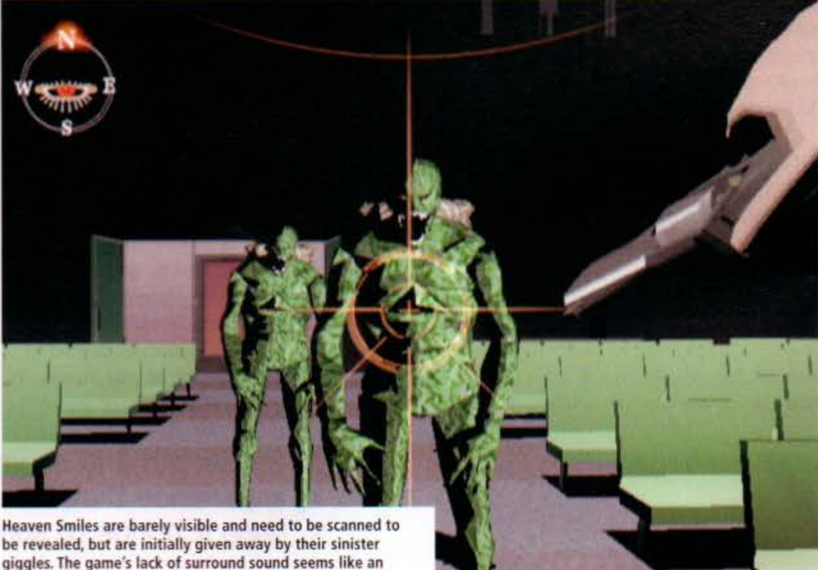


The script is excellent, encompassing all manner of topics, slang and non-sequiturs, but the voice-acting is poor. That doesn't include the many supportive ghosts who appear, whose voices are unnerving and incoherent vocoder rasps

available for those players who don't wish to approach the fray with an eye for accuracy and a thumb for steely nerve, but it's only so long before the game demands you approach battles coolly, taking Heaven Smiles down with single weak-spot hits, a necessity in order to reap Thick Blood for powering up each of the Killer 7's skills.

Like *Psychonauts*, its gameplay may sometimes feels in danger of jading, but is buffered immeasurably by its immense persona. As well as its outrageous and intensely imaginative exterior, it's a game rife with accomplished sound design, both in its music – which effortlessly switches through a spectrum of moods – to the effects, both subtle and offensive – from the jarring guitar screech that greets an unresolved puzzle, to the soft acoustic strum that accompanies its solution.

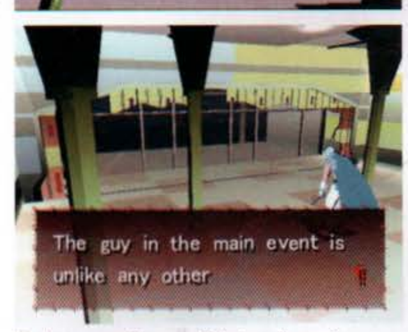
It's difficult to shake the sensation that *Killer 7* is an important production, as paving for future creative leeway if nothing else. But its likely love/hate status is testament to just how adamant it has attempted to be in its flair for extraordinary presentation. Despite its outlandish and unconventional manner, it's a game whose characters and storylines are far more engaging and confrontational than any number of big-balled thirdperson grit 'em ups, presenting subjects like domestic abuse, politics and grisly execution without getting bogged down in them. With something this focused and so seemingly untroubled by the cynical tendencies of many modern games, it's also



Heaven Smiles are barely visible and need to be scanned to be revealed, but are initially given away by their sinister giggles. The game's lack of surround sound seems like an oversight, but one possibly explained by the fixed-camera switches in the game. Each Smith can turn quickly – sometimes with a gymnastic flip – if a hasty retreat is needed

tough not to see it as some kind of antidote to the abundance of muscular mannequins and snarling action dumbos.

Those who are repelled by *Killer 7*'s presentation will likely find its stylings to be little more than a pompous and self-involved inconvenience, a cold sequence of ambushes and not much else. It's gaming's own cross-eyed idiot savant, one that will be seen by some as refreshing and well-pitched lunacy, a tongue-in-cheek ride whose appeal arguably goes beyond its solid strengths as a purely out-and-out videogame. And whether that comes across as a warning or a blessing is key to whether *Killer 7* is worth your time. **[8]**



Puzzles are sometimes cryptic, but usually require thorough exploration or simply remembering pieces of information dispensed at other locations. The obliging in-game map shouldn't be overlooked, as it contains explicit information about what object or Smith can be used to overcome whatever barriers or locks stand in your way

Path-ology



Even though *Killer 7*'s locations and settings veer wildly even within each stage, there's a strict method to the progression through each level. A handful of Soul Shell bullets must be collected by completing tasks, which are handed to the Gatekeeper. This allows the Killer 7 to head to the Coliseum, an odd portal that confronts players with a stand-off against a new type of Heaven Smile enemy, and whose entrance and exit is a dark corridor filled with cheesy dance music. Negotiating the Coliseum allows the assassins to move on to the final target of each assignment. New missions are doled out to Garcian Smith, the team's 'cleaner', from his residence, which is also home to Harman Smith and a number of shocking cut-scenes involving his schizophrenic carer Samantha.



BATTLEFIELD 2

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: DIGITAL ILLUSIONS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E146





Special-ops troops are likely to become favourites throughout the game's servers, armed as they are with accurate weaponry and devastating C4 charges that stick to most surfaces. For defending a capture point against heavy artillery, there are few more effective weapons

The *Battlefield* series' defining achievement is its downscaling of war. Beyond providing umpteen tools and arenas for audacious gambits and eclectic destruction, it maintains a steady, if not perfect, set of rules that faithfully reflects the real-life balance of combat. For every device or tactic that threatens to turn the tide, an opposite number exists to turn it back – that's the fundament of any competitive event, but in massively multiplayer videogaming its importance is paramount. With this fervently anticipated sequel, Digital Illusions has a precarious mission to accomplish: not only to tweak that experience, but to elevate it entirely.

The debriefing, in short, declares victory. *Battlefield 2* is an immersive and captivating experience that, for all the increased flash and bang it brings to each game, achieves a governing balance equal, if not superior, to its predecessors. Every sniper, for instance, handicapped as they are with awkward reloading and reduced shot power, will have an air patrol searching for them. For every tank, similarly, there's an anti-tank infantryman with missiles to spend. Though the roles of each troop class, from medic to the newly introduced special ops, have expanded in versatility, their overall effectiveness in the field remains equitable.

As a sandbox, much of the game's further achievement stems from the difficulty in singling out specific vehicles, weapons, classes and methods as the most enjoyable. Reward is sewn into its very fabric, from the measured turn of ground-to-air artillery as it pummels the sky to the supreme satisfaction of watching opponents lift off in a helicopter previously laden with explosives, primed to shear it in half at the click of your mouse. As is so often the case with games of this calibre, pleasure exists for the victim as well as the executioner, the devious brilliance, uncommon fluke or simple twitch reflex behind most kills appreciable by all.

In its portrayal, this havoc is no less refined. Explosions, for instance, are less depicted and more recreated, the sight and sound of a C4 blast being less an outwardly flung amalgam of sparks, smoke and miscellaneous debris, and more the authentic clap of a vehicle being kicked out of shape and cloaked in airborne grit. The collaboration of event and environment, while never overstretching itself in complexity, makes for a thunderous frontline where destruction lingers in the air – a fog of war that, for once, is about atmosphere rather than specs.



Each of the game's airborne vehicles features its own distinctive HUD, localised to whichever of the three depicted nations manufactured it. Targets are tracked and locked on before the crew unleash the firepower, choppers such as that pictured above offering TV-guided missiles for their co-pilots to play with

Battlefield prioritises the impact of this milieu above all, toggling reality and hyper-reality to suit. While it applies exquisite depth-of-focus effects to weapons held close to the eye, it throws its ragdoll troops about like ballerinas. The visual clout lies beyond the shaders and textures that, when detached from the overall composition, are 'merely' very good. Arranged as they are – drawn to an epic distance in layer upon self-shadowed layer – they form a moving image unparalleled in games of this scale.

The 12 warzones are ambitious to the point where the term 'maps' feels inadequate. The disparately themed locations, each home to three scaled configurations of boundaries, flags and indigenous equipment, are no mere arrangement of routine furniture. Their sheer believability, meticulously detailed with circuitous geography, puts these environments far beyond what we've come to expect of contemporary multiplayer game design.

This isn't to say, however, that the more immediate sights are any less striking. Tanks, for example, recoil with a dozen degrees of articulation as they pile flashes of ordnance into their chosen targets. Aerials flap in the wind, the ground rises into dust with their passing and the entire firstperson view shakes to a blur when they attack nearby. When inside, their turrets swivel with all the

> Battlefield 2 is an immersive and captivating experience that, for all the increased flash and bang it brings to each game, achieves balance



Driving is most satisfyingly experienced through the firstperson camera, the CTRL key acting as a mouse-look modifier that reveals the full scale of the environment



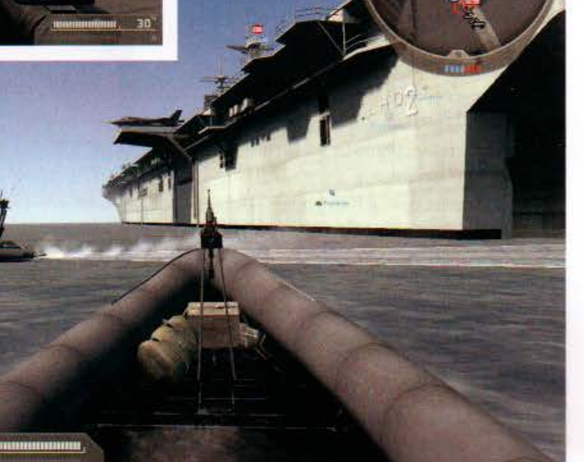




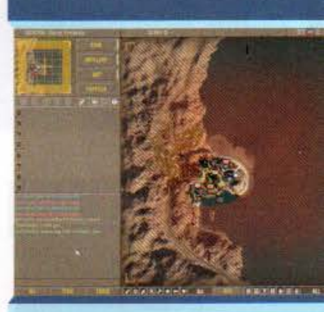
Jets (left) can be a challenge to control effectively without a joystick, but retain lethal grace as they pursue their adversaries above the ground and terrorise the infantrymen upon it







Mergers and supervisions



Two of the biggest changes made to *Battlefield*'s dynamic are the introductions of Squad and Commander modes. At any time during combat, a submenu of the spawn screen will offer the choice of either founding or joining a squad. More than just an instant clan, squads serve as mobile spawn points that will completely alter your perception of how the game should be played. Alternatively, the beginning of every game sees a commander election in which all can participate. The commander is responsible for coordinating artillery strikes, supply drops and general surveillance of the ongoing fight. Best positioned (it would seem) high above the action with a sniper rifle, the commander must remain watchful for those enemy special-ops units that sneak in and destroy vital infrastructure.



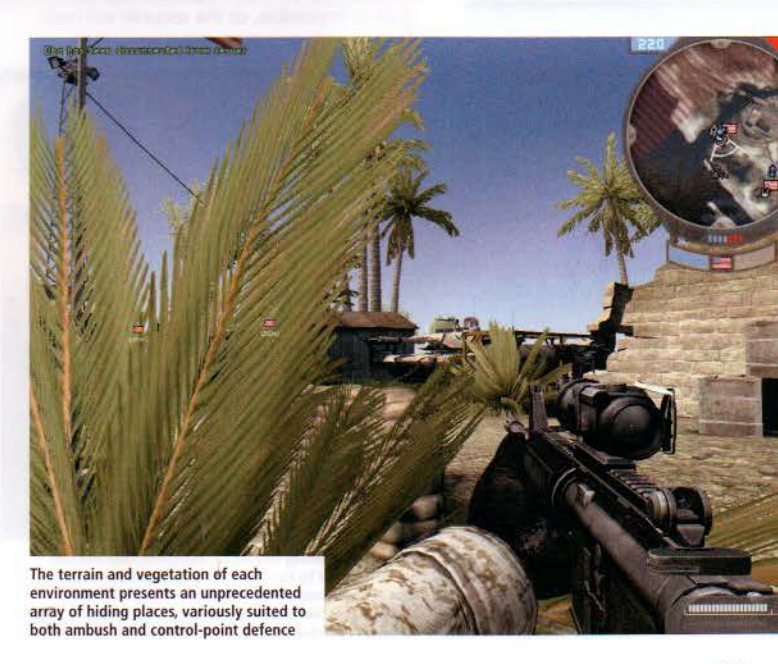
Given the right hardware, the only limit *Battlefield* places on your line of sight is obtrusive geography, its richly detailed landscapes stretching far into the distance. Those forced to compromise on looks, however, needn't worry too much as there are few weapons in the game effective at this range

inertia you'd expect of heavy metal engineered to glide against itself as best it can. For each of the game's many vehicles there's at least one such aspect of handling, weaponry or presentation that will endear it to someone, if not to all.

Though *Battlefield*'s bots are still a world apart from the vigour of human opposition, the game's 16-man singleplayer matches are decent, if only for the honing of marksmanship and learning the ropes of its many machines. As before, Digital Illusions will provide a modder's toolset for those unhappy with how the engine calculates ballistics damage and otherwise conducts its game. Indeed, the default experience has its share of imperfections. Spawn killing, though partially alleviated by the squad system (see 'Mergers and supervisions'), still rears its ugly head from time to time, not least when contesting an area where your team's single remaining capture point has been overrun by the opposition.

So complex is the terrain and so effective the game's many transit systems that regrouping an overwhelmed team can also be a formidable challenge. Though it largely proves effective, the punishment system for team-kills can backfire if, say, a player gunning for a Darwin Award dawdles across the runway while you're taking off in a jet, subsequently taking the option to heavily penalise you. This latter point, however, is more a failure of player etiquette than of the game itself which, really, tries enormously hard to tie up any loose ends and typically succeeds.

Battlefield 2 is a much-needed statement of authority for the PC – an online spectacle that eclipses the grand rhetoric volleyed back and forth between the manufacturers of tomorrow's super-powered consoles. While those presently paper tigers growl at each other from afar, so a new level of multiplayer combat begins here and now, with shock and awe. **[9]**



The terrain and vegetation of each environment presents an unprecedented array of hiding places, variously suited to both ambush and control-point defence



GUILD WARS

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NCSOFT DEVELOPER: ARENANET

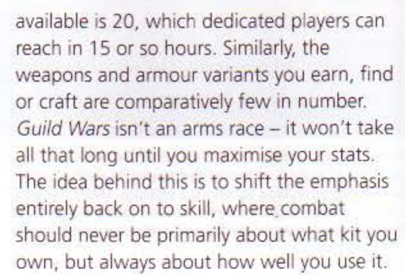
A tale of two tales



***Guild Wars*' main story is clumsily told through a series of in-engine, awkwardly directed cut-scenes. The hokey plotting and dialogue add little to the game, but happily that's not where the game's narrative heart lies. The hundreds of sub-missions and quests add delicate, human detail to the bombast of the main story, and following the lives of the people you meet as they deal with the loss of loved ones, or the consequences of infidelities, is as appealing a reward for completion as the extra experience points.**

Guild Wars is as much a manifesto as a videogame. Designed to wrench online, multiplayer RPGs out of the evolutionary cul-de-sac they call home, ArenaNet set out to create a deep, involving game which didn't rely on amassing hundreds of thousands of experience points, or grinding for hundreds of hours to create that one weapon which will make you almost invincible, or investing tens of pounds a year in subscription fees to pay for the diminishing returns of a near-obsession. In this it has succeeded, but the unexpected irony is that *Guild Wars* is arguably less accessible to newcomers to the genre than the old, grind-dependent dinosaurs.

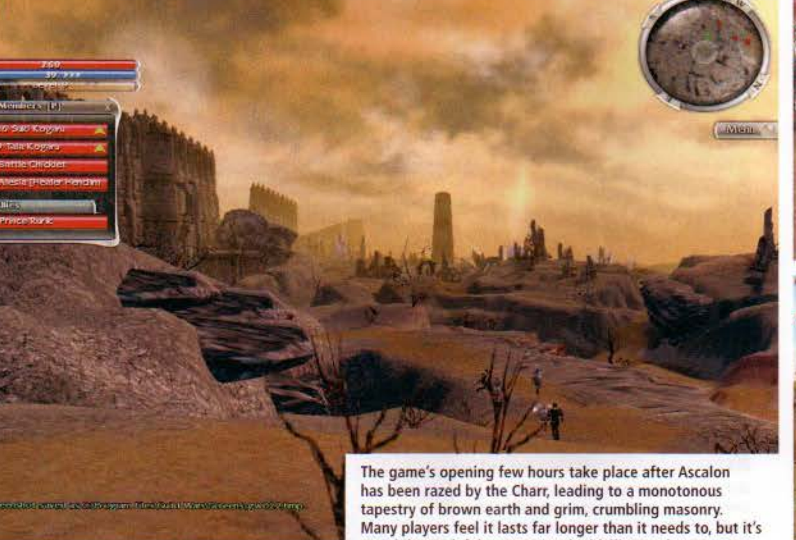
On the surface, much of *Guild Wars* seems a familiar proposition. Set in a vast and varied online world, it follows the story of the refugees of Ascalon, ousted from their homelands by a catastrophic attack unleashed by their enemies, the Charr. Although the world forms a continuous whole, each area is instanced, so players must meet up in towns and outposts to form parties before embarking into their own, private version of each region. Solo play is close to impossible, so the sociable will need to team up with other players to form well-balanced parties, while the more independent-minded can recruit a number of NPC henchmen to watch their backs.



Completing missions and killing the enemies within those areas earns you experience, but experience is a very marginalised currency within *Guild Wars*. It earns you little more than a small heath boost per level, and the highest level available is 20, which dedicated players can reach in 15 or so hours. Similarly, the weapons and armour variants you earn, find or craft are comparatively few in number. *Guild Wars* isn't an arms race – it won't take all that long until you maximise your stats. The idea behind this is to shift the emphasis entirely back on to skill, where combat should never be primarily about what kit you own, but always about how well you use it.

And this is where *Guild Wars*' depth and sophistication make themselves shown. Each character can have a primary and secondary profession, drawn from a range of warrior, ranger, monk, necromancer, mesmer and elementalist. As you play, you earn skill points, which can be spent to buy spells or abilities for each of your professions. Many dozens are available, but you can select only eight to use, chosen each time you embark on a mission. However, the strength of these skills is dependent on how you spend your attribute points, also earned by levelling up – so an elementalist's flame spells won't hit for much damage until she invests some attribute points in her Fire Magic stats. Spending attribute points isn't a fixed decision – as you earn experience, you earn refund points which allow you to freely redistribute your points as often as you need.

It sounds a complex system, but it allows the player to tailor their character to exacting specifications depending on their whim, their



The game's opening few hours take place after Ascalon has been razed by the Charr, leading to a monotonous tapestry of brown earth and grim, crumbling masonry. Many players feel it lasts far longer than it needs to, but it's certainly a painful contrast to the idyllic opening scenes











Although much of *Guild Wars'* world is beautifully created, it never convinces as a real, inhabited landscape. This is partly due to the instanced structure of the game, but also because of a lack of NPC bustle and the strangely inhuman scale of much of the architecture



Finding a party before a PvP mission is slightly reminiscent of the meat-market of a school dance. The downside to having no server shards is that it's rarer to bump into familiar faces – your friends lists and guild membership are essential tools







There is a decent enough range of character customisation options, but the small range of armour available and the emphatic nature of the animation can produce moments when the world feels full of clones

mission objectives, or the abilities of the other people in their parties. A monk/ranger who finds himself partied with two other healers may choose to abandon all his healing spells, and invest his points in smiting magic and special attacks, turning himself in a few seconds into a main attack unit. Once that mission is over, he can switch back.

It means that planning, communication and forethought are essential to play the game well. Although combat requires both dexterity and fast, tactical thought, a huge part of the game's skill comes from cooperating with teammates to create an ingeniously balanced party, and investing the time to learn how each character class combination, in each of their main attribute guises, is able to play. It's absorbing stuff, and it's at its best in the game's extensive PvP modes, but it's something which takes time and structure to get the most out of, and this is what *Guild Wars* is poor at providing.

> It's absorbing stuff, and it's at its best in the extensive PvP modes, but it's something which takes time and structure to get the most out of

Within the main Story mode of the game, a number of PvP arenas are available, which assign you random parties or provide a lobby where you can collect together a team – solo play is not an option, as all PvP takes place either as four-on-four or eight-on-eight battles. These rarely provide the opportunity to discuss tactics, or compare loadouts, so the fights – while providing instant, no-hassle access to the game's multiplayer – do little to express the game's tactical heart.

It's for this reason that *Guild Wars* offers its most anti-intuitive innovation. From the very first moment you load the game, you have the option of creating a level 20 character, decked out with top-class equipment and a reasonable range of high-level skills. These can be customised to your liking, and seconds later you can be toe-to-toe with the very best players in the world – and in the whole world, at that, since another of *Guild Wars'* distinguishing features is that there are no server or shard divisions: everyone can play with everyone.

Again, it's a successful and stimulating idea, but at its best only when the structure is there to support it. Find eight people to play with regularly, and invest in voice communications to streamline tactical discussions, and *Guild Wars* offers an intelligent and demanding thrill – bringing the best of the skill and strategy of FPS deathmatches to the grandeur of a role-playing world. Start off without that framework, however, and you face an uphill struggle to get the most out of the game – where story mode missions are spoiled by one unsportsmanlike player, PvP battles are undercut by uncomplimentary loadout choices, and joining guilds to solve the first two problems can be an unpredictable game of roulette. **[7]**



PvP maps include basic deathmatch variants, as well as maps where teams are protected by an NPC healer who can periodically resurrect them, but can also be killed by the opposing team. In many maps, finding a good vantage point for spellcasters is a sure way to succeed





In a hangover from '80s RPGs, all your weapons have a limited number of attacks – meaning it's important to keep a keen eye on stock levels so as not to leave a key member of your squad weaponless mid-fight

FIRE EMBLEM: THE SACRED STONES

FORMAT: GBA PRICE: $30 (£17) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK) PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

Telling stories



Much of *Fire Emblem*'s appeal comes from its story, which bludgeons you into caring intimately for the characters you spend so much time investing in. The story deftly twists and turns with Ridley Scott-esque self-conscious coherence. There's no denying it does what it does very well but, even so, the pseudo-historical storyline will polarise players depending on their aversion or attraction to lip-trembling homilies, elegiac soliloquies and black-and-white Nintendo morality.

To call *Fire Emblem* a medieval *Advance Wars* would be lazy and, certainly with this richly textured iteration, only a half-truth. For, while Intelligent Systems' two strategy wunderkinds share something in terms of visuals, systems, mechanics and characterisations, *Fire Emblem* inhabits a more solemn and deeper niche than its rival's lighthearted warmongering.

This, the third GBA game, answers some of its recent handheld critics by reintroducing a spattering of its earlier SNES-era intricacies. But these, such as characters forming beneficial offensive link relationships if they are continually positioned next to each other, are hidden well below the surface and to many the game will seem identical to its two most recent forbears save the new storyline slipped into its venerable framework.

Your team of fighters, magicians and healers, all richly coloured-in with backstory, engage enemy units in battle, visiting shops and villages during fights as well as picking up new recruits in the field. All but three characters (who you can choose to level up as you wish) follow a predefined profession, while the series' hallmark – that fallen characters stay dead and unusable for the rest of the game – remains, providing many a hair-tearing moment for the obsessive-compulsive RPG completist.



Turning off your GBA midgame means that the game will automatically be suspended at that precise move – perfect for gaming on the go as well as ensuring that you can't cheat death by restarting the system to avoid a fatal mistake

The most contentious issue in this release of *Fire Emblem* is the introduction of an *Ogre Battle*-esque overworld map, enabling the revisiting of areas to buy weapons (previously only possible by visiting shops in the field during a battle) as well as providing optional random dungeon maps. While this might not seem like a major development in a genre that has always provided extracurricular levelling opportunities, it has removed the developer's strict control over the game's difficulty. For a title whose distinctive trait has traditionally been forcing players to agonise over positioning and deployment through a perfectly arced difficulty curve, this is counter-intuitive. Over-levelling all too easily threatens to undermine *Fire Emblem*'s unique place in the genre. It's a problem easily sidestepped by both choosing an appropriate difficulty level and tempering your levelling, but nevertheless the option is unwelcome.

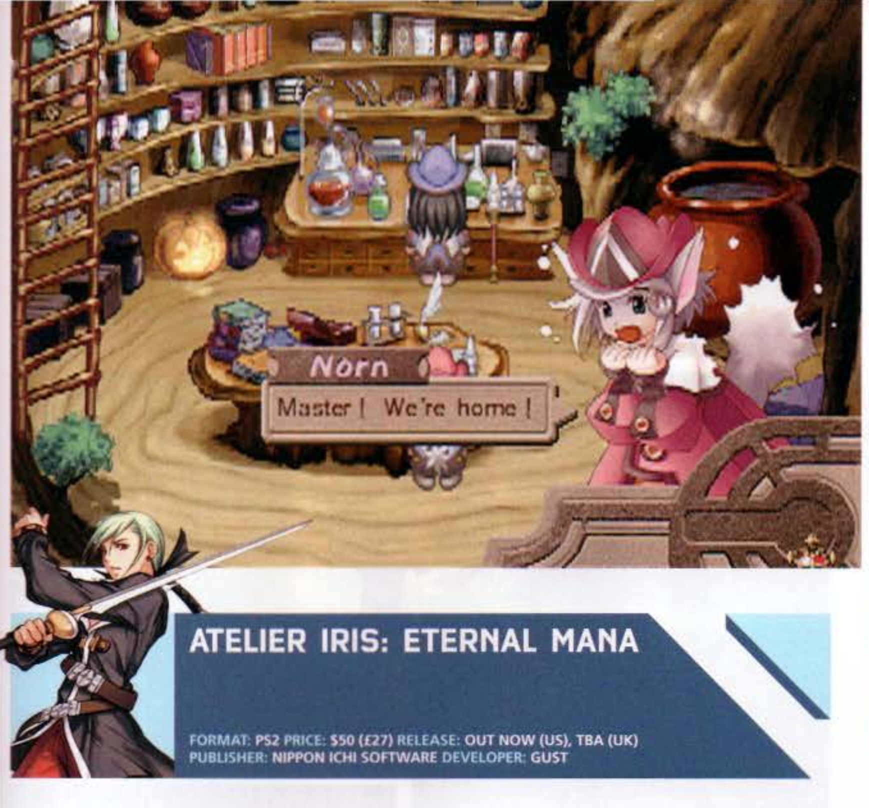
Manage to find the difficulty level best suited to your play style and you'll find the experience a delightful tightrope walk on the border of pain and pleasure. It's a frequently infuriating game, even if you disregard the extreme caution necessary to ensure your entire team makes it to the closing credits. Often, the sheer shock of a misread attack that sends one of your nurtured avatars to their eternal limbo will draw in the red mist, making the most even-tempered gamer impetuously scramble for the off switch. But where many games would be cast aside at this point, the wonder of *Fire Emblem* is just how quickly you turn it back on again in search of strategy perfection. **[7]**





The game reintroduces the skill commands from *Fire Emblem IV* and *V* to great benefit. Higher-level characters are given intermittent abilities such as the assassin's instant KO move or the sniper's 100 per cent hit sure shot. The scissor-paper-stones weapon triangle (right) on which the outcome of all encounters is based (spear defeats sword defeats axe defeats spear) remains, as does its magical counterpart (dark defeats anima defeats light defeats dark)





ATELIER IRIS: ETERNAL MANA

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $50 (£27) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: NIPPON ICHI SOFTWARE DEVELOPER: GUST

It's fair to say that the cooking and alchemy RPG subgenre has never enjoyed much of a platform in the west. Gust's long established *Atelier* series of RPGs takes these two peculiarly Japanese gameplay curios and sews them together with more traditional roleplay paraphernalia into a glorious patchwork of play. That Nippon Ichi, with its line-up of strategy RPG nouveau-classics, should choose the sixth *Atelier* game as its first out-of-house US release speaks volumes about the depth of the title. *Atelier Iris*, it seems, aims to do for the action RPG what *Disgaea* did for the strategy RPG.





The problem of levelling-up an expanding team equally is skilfully avoided as all members of your troupe share the experience, albeit with those sitting out that particular fight getting a smaller proportion of the points doled out

Despite his alchemist job title, protagonist Klein Kiesling isn't pursuing the secret of gold. Rather he specialises in the extraction of objects' Elements, which, with the help of befriended Tamagotchi-style elemental Mana, can be used to create new spells and attacks. The game's huge inventory of items can be also used to create food recipes and new items for the game's various shops.

Recipes are reviewed and rated, based on the quality and suitability of the ingredients you use, and in turn attract customers to the host shop while becoming available to buy and use in battle as items in their own right. The game's economics turn traditional videogame consumerist mechanics on their head, encouraging player contribution to the overall benefit of the society surrounding the narrative. You're often more likely to spend your cash on a pot of castor oil and a rare fish to try out in a new recipe than on buying incrementally superior armour – although that option is always there.

Whereas most RPGs reveal all their tricks in the first couple of hours, *Atelier Iris* keeps revealing gameplay avenues to explore throughout. Eventually, this results in an elaborate gameplay map that grants freedom from the largely on-rails storyline to explore whichever part of the game suits your mood. Indeed, the bumbling overarching story is persistent but never overbearing, often slipping down the list of immediate priorities. It's worth returning to, however – enhanced by a genuinely humorous translation that has been sculpted by a localiser with a twinkle in their eye. It strays creatively from the literal Japanese, providing immensely enjoyable dialogue that sparkles next to its bland contemporaries.

Indeed, the game's inimitable character bursts at the seams of what was clearly a limited budget. There is none of SquareSoft's dull-eyed cinematic waste here, which will no doubt alienate swathes of both genre fans and critics. But the charm of the title coupled with its breathtaking breadth and depth will win over more discerning gamers.

Race your way from introduction to denouement and you'll be disappointed. But relish the game's systems and character and you'll uncover an individual, enduring and memorable RPG. **[7]**

Atelier Iris continues Nippon Ichi's much welcomed localisation trait of including the fully switchable option of the original Japanese or a new (grating) American one



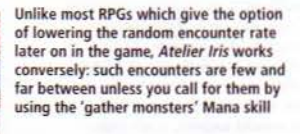


Unlike most RPGs which give the option of lowering the random encounter rate later on in the game, *Atelier Iris* works conversely: such encounters are few and far between unless you call for them by using the 'gather monsters' Mana skill



Each new facet of gameplay is unveiled via an (optional) lighthearted 'lecture' by your diminutive wood Mana, who invites various members of the cast to give guest teaching spots explaining how to use your new skills

Obsessive compulsive





Atelier Iris sits comfortably within Nippon Ichi's carefully carved niche for fanatical detail. At any point you can visit a cheerful traveller girl who, at her caravan base, keeps a log of all the items you find and create in the game. Finding new items and item sets unlocks various bonuses. While essentially this boils down to a Pokémon-style 'gotta catch 'em all', filling in the gaps becomes irresistible – especially when you factor in stumbling upon many new recipes by chance. Much time can be spent tweaking existing recipes in the hope you'll happen upon something new that will both improve your favourite shop's standing with the public and fill in one of the baiting blanks in the item log.



ADVENT RISING

FORMAT: XBOX PRICE: $50 (£27)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: MAJESCO DEVELOPER: GLYPHX GAMES

Minus worlds



If *Advent Rising*'s final boss seems suspiciously tinged with an air of *Zelda*-esque familiarity, this should be a reassuring sign that it's not just you. Well hidden throughout a number of the levels are familiar green pipes, leading you to a tiled underworld level with floating platforms. As you would expect, each pipe warps you to a later level – an adorable homage made only slightly less useful by the full level-select options available at the title screen. Either way, it's another reminder of the laudable influences and intentions that GlyphX brought to the game, even if they went mostly un- or under-realised.

There's a too-easy comparison hiding in plain view – it's in the neon green and purple hazes that bleed off the lush planetary surfaces, it's in the all-terrain vehicle complete with AI-controlled tailgate gunner and the plasma-firing hover-tanks, it's in the mandible-split of the humanoid aliens, the choral accompaniment, and the episodic, operatic space saga in which an otherworldly race seeks to wipe out all of humankind – but *Advent Rising* never comes close enough to filling the epically oversized shoes that the similarities might wish to conjure.

Reduced to its simplest terms and stripped of its highly aspiring overtones, *Rising* is essentially a competent shooter with its heart in the right place, and a ton of ideas that never gel into any cohesive whole. Its vaunted 'flick targeting,' a lock-on system controlled by flicking the right analogue stick in the direction of the enemy on which you'd like to fire, can occasionally serve useful in the thickest of firefights, but throughout the majority of your adventures little more than a run-and-gun strategy will inevitably get the job done, as the game provides ample auto-targeting of its own. The weaponry provided seems to have been designed with the intent of strategic purpose, and makes use of a novel levelling system that rewards preferred use with auxiliary functions, but the game regularly cheats itself out of any depth by favouring battles that simply toss wave after strictly scripted wave of easily gunned-down foes that require little more than firmly squeezed triggers and a steady and constant strafe.





Brief bouts of vehicular combat punctuate the more traditional levels, but the near-impenetrable defences of the tanks and jeeps eliminate any strategy, leaving you once more advancing with the triggers at full squeeze



By the end of the game, you're able to ditch weapons completely in favour of Gideon's psi-powers. As with the weapons, the more an attack is used, greater levels of power and magnitude are unlocked, making it possible to dispatch entire groups of enemies at once

However, none of these failed or diminished aspirations actually prevent *Advent* from achieving moments of undeniable basic pleasure. As hero Gideon unlocks his inner potential with a series of psi-powers, a sandbox of stylish bulletless and balletic options give at very least the illusion of combat variety and, combined with a handful of curiously well-designed pattern-based boss battles in the last quarter of the game, hint at the true potential the game must have had at one point. *Rising*'s levels, though at first glance strictly linear, are deceptively complex, with a number of secret areas awaiting more patient or exploratory players, though none necessarily providing real reward beyond their very discovery (especially after the game's current real-life million-dollar treasure hunt).

It's a textbook case of reach exceeding grasp, but with its reach set far enough that what it grasps isn't nothing but air. Taken at face value and with an ounce of forgiveness for a fairly steady bout of benign technical hiccups, *Advent Rising* is a decent adventure wrapped in a paper-thin veneer of epic potential. **[6]**



Even without the flick system, each of Gideon's dual wields auto-target the nearest enemy, even if on opposite sides of the screen, trivialising the relevance of the system itself. The system's awkwardness in competing with camera control does eventually fade, or the sensitivity can be adjusted if you find it too cumbersome. Rather than having exploitable weak spots or complex group AI, the Seekers find their strength in sheer numbers which, in some cases, can be run past completely, though not necessarily by design






The inertia of the flying vehicles has been judged well, allowing you to fix on targets quickly while avoiding embarrassing crashes. Generate a Mule and you'll be able to transport several colleagues to a destination

CONKER: LIVE & RELOADED

FORMAT: XBOX PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: RARE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E145, E149

There's nothing quite like *Conker*. Talking pitchforks, flowers with enormous breasts and bosses with names like The Great Mighty Poo and Buga the Knut make for a videogame experience like no other. Those who haven't played the N64 game should take this chance to witness it for themselves, if only to see a company wallowing in bad taste. The comedy, as well as the gameplay, veers wildly between inspired Monty Python excess and groan-inducing Dick 'n' Dom slapstick.




Describing *Conker's Bad Fur Day* as a simple platform game is misleading, especially when rolling enormous balls of excrement up a hillside qualifies as one of the game's more memorable, if unsettlingly repulsive, moments

Tighter controls and obvious improvements to the graphics give the Story mode a boost, but there's no hiding the fact that this is retrogaming. Yes, *Conker* may only be four years old, but even on its original release many elements felt dated. Design motifs repeat from set-piece to set-piece, and while much of it is done with self-conscious parody it's hardly sophisticated. Yet the fast pace, amusing movie references and variety of locations – anything from a slurry pit populated by animated sweetcorn to a submarine – save it from complete inanity.

Fortunately the multiplayer maps – which include versus games, coop, solo with bots and full Xbox Live support for up to 16 players – are intricate, beautifully designed, varied and forward looking. Conker may be showing his age, but these anarchic battles between the Tediz and the SHC forces are about the best you'll find on a console.

The multiplayer games are a masterclass in depth and game balance with every unit type, from the Long Ranger to the Grunt, offering a heady cocktail of unique talents and powerful upgrades. The Sneeker, for instance, can cloak, play dead, hack into enemy terminals and even snoop on the enemy with a remote-control drone. Exploring the talents of each, then putting them to strategic advantage, is utterly absorbing, but you'll be hard pressed to find one that's more enjoyable than another.






The obligatory beach landing map is a tremendous introduction to the controlled frenzy found in all the multiplayer games. A thin story links each map to the next, and it's as mad as a teddy with a bazooka. Although the maps are superbly designed, the visuals rank somewhere between vivid and ugly, but at least they don't follow the current vogue for reflective metal and flashing neon lights

Vehicles, too, are robust, reckless and fun. Simply watching the skies as colleagues fight it out in Steeds and Mules can be captivating but get in one yourself and it's both liberating and empowering. All the usual game types are supported, though this is no derivative dumb shooter. The layers of strategic possibilities start to reveal themselves once turret guns, mobile teleporters and floating skill and weapon upgrades are used to best advantage. It's bewildering at first, but there's an immense pleasure to be gained from learning the intricacies. As a complete game package *Conker: Live & Reloaded* is tremendously good value. Significantly, it also shows a company finally back on form. **[8]**

Live and let live



Mystifyingly, *Conker's Bad Fur Day* uses the old three-strikes-and-you're-out approach to death, a throwback to the golden age of arcade games. Apart from an 'amusing' scene in which Death explains the system, this offers nothing but frustration to the player. The loading screen, cut-scene and button presses required to get you back to the place at which you died could so easily have been avoided with a bit of tinkering. Meanwhile, apart from a couple of gags and the bleeping out of the worst swearwords, the Story mode is largely identical to that on N64.





Max out your adrenaline meter and it's possible to become invulnerable for a while. This proves vital in later levels but feels ridiculous in the context of a historical videogame



MEDAL OF HONOR: EUROPEAN ASSAULT

FORMAT: GC, PS2, XBOX (TESTED) PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (EA LOS ANGELES)

The mawkish orchestral dirge plays you in, swiftly followed by black-and-white Movietone footage of genuine WWII battles. Over these images the rusty voice of a veteran sets the scene and narrates how Hitler's forces marched through one territory or another. It's the same format laid down six years ago in the original PSone *Medal Of Honor*, but now it feels hackneyed and pompous, seeming more interested with schmaltzy commercial appeal than historical accuracy. That entertainment is the game's primary goal is no bad thing; that it fails to live up to its own self-important billing is.

At least this latest instalment has dumped the now-notorious *MOH* on-rails level design and replaced it with open-plan maps. But this is the only improvement. Objectives are now indicated with arrows on the compass and the game can feel breathless, tense and liberating now it's free of the tight corridors and endless rubble barriers. There are still demarcation boundaries, of course, but the opportunity to take several routes to your goal is a welcome relief.

The combat has also been overhauled to encourage players to take a more circumspect approach rather than endless gung-ho, bullet-spraying rampages. Enemy bullets are noticeably more deleterious and running into a group of Germans is suicidal. Note, though, that it's the bullets that are dangerous rather than the enemies. The level design may have improved but the enemy AI is ludicrously inept, the game providing little more than targets that duck up and down.

And then there's the mystifying decision to litter these war-torn landscapes with icons. Not just small, discreet indicators, but garish fluorescent symbols that are completely at odds with the portentous, historical tone set by the cut-scenes and intros. Forgivable, perhaps, on the larger battlefields but in tighter corridors it's irritating to have the middle of the screen covered by an 'objective update' icon just when an enemy rounds the corner. It sometimes feels like a version of *Doom* made for the visually impaired.

If that weren't enough to put you off, consider this: *European Assault* is one of the ugliest current-gen games we've seen. Boring textures, a weak palette and a flimsy design aesthetic all round make it appear like slightly dressed-up old PSone data. The animation seems inspired by amateur puppetry and even the menus look like they were knocked up in the last day before submission. For EA, with its reputation for high production values, this is genuinely weird.

As a historical endeavour, supposedly respectful and authentic to the men who fought in WWII, this is a burlesque. As a game, the occasional moments of intensity always give way to frustration, if not downright boredom. In short, *European Assault* is fairly rotten to the corp. [3

Last orders

In line with current trends, *European Assault* gives you command over several allies, albeit in a limited capacity. Pressing the left trigger issues the order for them to advance to a point indicated, but that's about it. Each friendly trooper also has an energy bar (indicated by a huge fluorescent star, obviously) and you can sacrifice medipacks to heal them, though in practice it's better to selfishly hold on to these for yourself. There's no question that these allies can be used to good effect, but only to distract and suppress the enemy while you perform the heroics. Left to their own devices they generally get in the way and follow you around like lobotomised idiots.



German generals double as boss characters, but only distinguish themselves from other foes by having a large health meter above their heads. Running after them and gunning them down feels silly rather than exhilarating

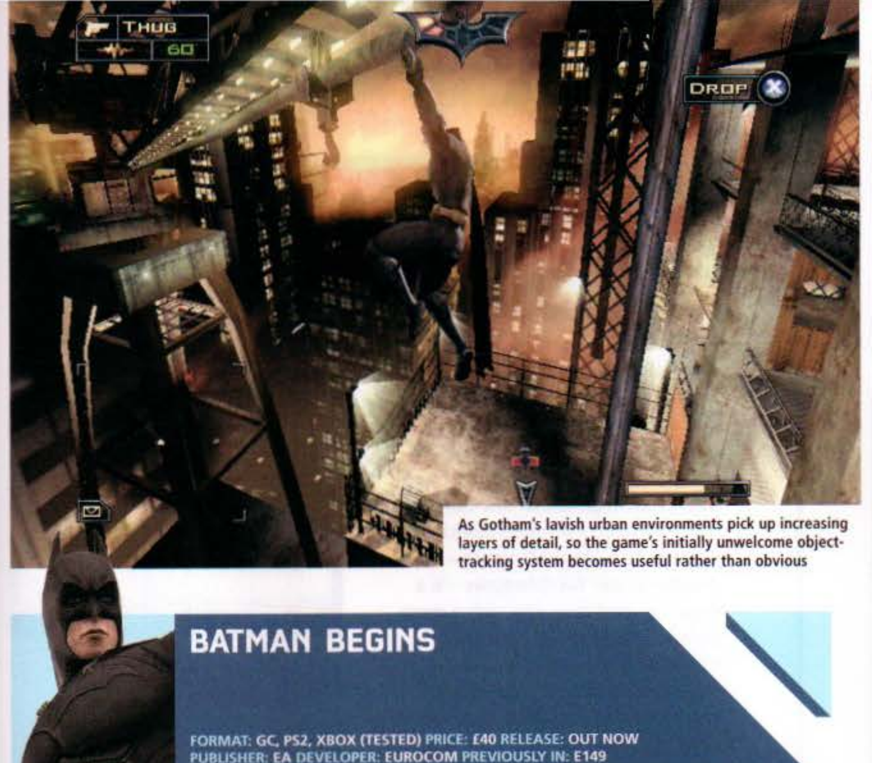


There are no checkpoint markers to pass or savepoints to make use of in the game – something that can prove infuriating when you get killed at the very last hurdle





Tiger tanks are little more than grey blocks, and illustrate the impoverished quality of the graphics. Grenades or a bazooka can take them out, but only after several hits



As Gotham's lavish urban environments pick up increasing layers of detail, so the game's initially unwelcome object-tracking system becomes useful rather than obvious





Taking a break from thirdperson stealth for some Batman *Burnout*, the driving stages are eye-catching but easy, especially for those familiar with slow-motion 'takedowns' and traffic-dodging. The ability of the Batmobile (and its unlockable prototype) to smash through traffic hardly bolsters the challenge

BATMAN BEGINS

FORMAT: GC, PS2, XBOX (TESTED) PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: EUROCOM PREVIOUSLY IN: E149

The first two hours of *Batman Begins* are an enormously protracted tutorial for a game that never actually aspires to be complex. Funnelling you from one linear path to the next, from one prompted button-press to the next, its opening suggests not the game of intimidation we've been led to expect, but a game that merely depicts intimidation from behind a glass screen. You will, indeed, instil fear in the hearts and minds of your opponents on both an individual and collective level, but it's an arbitrary process that leads from one prearranged set-piece to the next. It's disheartening and disappointing until, by simply elevating the intensity of that experience, it surprisingly clicks.

From the outset, *Begins* is an increasingly attractive journey that weaves around and throughout the postcard landmarks of the latest reinvented Gotham. Its environments are unequivocally stunning theatres of crisply textured disrepair and corroded grunge, pierced consistently by intense streaks of light. Were this a product of Ubisoft Montreal or Montpellier, it would ably meet that company's visual bar before likely triggering a eulogy as to how striking and powerful its games often look. Though its movie clips appear to have been cropped to fit with a blunt blade, its character models and authentic voiceovers are as professional as you'd expect from a returning movie cast, the overall composition serving as a testament to Eurocom's aim when shooting for the heart of a licence.

A cakewalk from start to finish at any difficulty setting, the game's an unapologetic follower of its mainstream genre's live-fast-die-young conventions, providing entertainment that gradually heats, never runs cold and provides an efficient six hours of play. Combat falls into two categories dictated by the enemies involved: those with guns must be circumvented, intimidated into dropping their weapons and then beaten to a pulp along with everyone else. Occasionally, you'll be required to interrogate fallen foes through repeated pressings of the same button, and while it's nothing more than a cut-scene masquerading as action, it's an inoffensive device.



Though it provides a rich ambience, *Begins'* contrast of dense shadows and light does little to augment its simple stealth mechanic, the levels bound to very linear paths

Where the game really succeeds, however, beyond providing a robust and solid, if unassuming model of explorative stealth and attack, is in fulfilling that old and oft-forgotten criterion – putting the gamer inside the movie. In this story of how a vengeful, broken man becomes a symbol of fear for the unjust, that theme's allure is brilliantly conveyed. The intimidation game, seldom demanding and often obvious, nonetheless makes for great viewing, the thugs, villains and crooked cops teasing and later petrifying each other with the mystery, horror and growing legend of the Batman.

Though its own qualities are sometimes undermined by its mimicking of others, *Batman Begins* is one of its developer's most accomplished game, even though its beginning, funnily enough, suggests that it'll be anything but. **[6]**



As both himself and the Dark Knight, Bruce Wayne carries a variety of useful gadgets into battle that range from smoke and flash grenades to, interestingly, a raging swirl of bats that envelops opponents and leaves their morale and fighting ability in tatters

Bat out of hell



In its latest, comic-book-faithful incarnation, Batman is a tale of urban fear and chaos being turned upon its perpetrators. In the game, the authentically heavy damage inflicted by bullets means that, for both thematic and mechanical reasons, an intimidation game must begin. As the story evolves and enemies are defeated, so Batman's growing reputation is gauged. Together with an area fear meter that rises as you bewilder your opponents, the panic triggered in your opponents serves to both disarm and weaken them before direct combat ensues. A typical intimidation involves grappling or climbing to a safe area before triggering an environmental distraction with your batarang, a further option being to then abseil down and abduct an opponent, increasing the confusion of those that remain.



BOMBERMAN DS

FORMAT: DS PRICE: ¥5,040 (£25)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), JULY (UK)
PUBLISHER: HUDSON SOFT DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE





The singleplayer touchscreen works very neatly, displaying your most recently acquired pick-up, as well as your stockpile and currently activated power-ups. However, since everything has to be thumb-sized, there's a slightly awkward need to scroll through the various items in your bank

It says a lot about the DS's development that, a year ago, what Hudson had to show of *Bomberman* was a twin-screened, 2D/3D hybrid that seemed to add nothing to the traditional formula and did little to convince anyone of the wisdom of the DS's design. Twelve months on, the game has returned to its roots and takes full and subtle advantage of the DS's abilities.

The singleplayer brings a quiet revolution to Bomberman's world. Power-ups, so crucial to his ability to construct perfectly planned grids of flambéed destruction, are now stockpiled rather than instantly activated. The touchscreen serves as an inventory, keeping track of which bonuses you have activated, and which you have banked. A quick stab of the thumb lets you switch on whatever combination of collected powers you chose. Dying only removes your activated power-ups, so on restarting it's now possible to raid your banked items to bring Bomberman instantly up to speed. It's a robust system, speeding up a game that can often become repetitive and wearing.

The reason for that is that singleplayer is never where *Bomberman*'s heart has been. This version, which allows the game to be beamed to any other DS owners in the area, makes the steely eyed frenzy of eightplayer battles more accessible than it has ever been before. The power-up system returns to classic mode for the multiplayer levels, and the maps fill both screens, linked by tunnels. There are 30 maps, each with an engaging twist on the *Bomberman* basics – use bombs to capture territory for your team, negotiate a wall of see-saws which can be used to launch bombs and opponents to the other side of the map, race through a dense maze to grab the crown before anyone else. Each level can be customised with options and bots to ensure you can create a game as classic or as perverted as you please.

But, despite its accomplishments, there's nothing new here, nor is the presentation particularly sharp. There are annoyances, too, most notably the awful, exhausting music which can't be turned off. But this wasn't a game created to win any design awards. It was created to give any DS owner the power to turn a roomful of friends into squealing, scheming, cursing, laughing Bombermen, and as such, it's hard to imagine why anyone would want to be without it. **[7]**



In multiplayer, dead players can use the touchscreen to flick bombs on to the playing field with pleasing accuracy. On some maps, you can use the microphone to shout 'Bom!' to detonate your timed exposives at just the right point



TRACE MEMORY

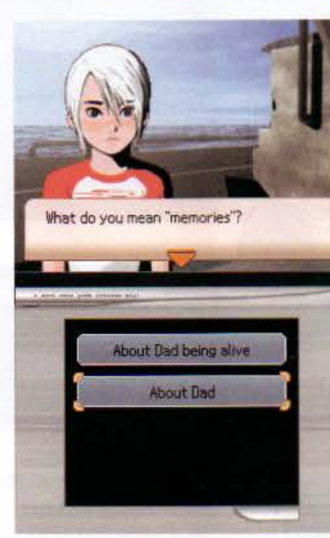
FORMAT: DS PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: CING INC

A regular criticism of the DS, and an observation that's delivered from such a distance as to completely miss the point, is that its games are nothing but strings of well-threaded minigames, or one-note stylus-powered mechanics stretched gimmick-thin. *Trace Memories* – aka *Another Code: Two Memories* – is a graphical adventure, one with a more generic anatomy than recent DS standouts: significant plot, rich characters, puzzles, dialogue and exploration. It's something that should dispel those remote dismissals quite effectively but, beneath that traditional garb, *Trace Memory* is about as derivative as *Electroplankton*.

There's no simplistic, begrudging lower-screen-as-inventory functionality here. The bottom screen offers a top-down view of 14-year-old Ashley, a contemplative delight among adventure protagonists and one capable of differentiating between angst and reflection, as she explores the menacingly titled Blood Edward Island, a secluded residence for her estranged father and a sinister family history. The upper screen displays portraits of notable characters and scenes worthy of investigation; between them, these multiple perspectives come together as an unusual pair of 3D glasses that make *Trace Memory* instantly engrossing, even if the environments on the lower screen aren't anywhere as beautiful as the game's 2D character models.

Its puzzles are equally vivid, explored through a variety of stylus tasks (along with some other charming methods), a number of which are as rich in imaginative implementation as their solutions are in satisfaction. But while executing those solutions is rarely anything but vastly gratifying, it's the composition of the problems that can grind. There's a perverse reverse logic in place, an immovable order in how they're uncovered; Ashley is only allowed access to the props behind a puzzle's solution once she's discovered where or how they'll be used, meaning that the player's foresight is cast to one side by this rigid structure – no matter how obviously useful an item, it often can't be picked up until the puzzle is 'activated' – leading to some begrudging backpedalling.

Still, *Trace Memory* is a sound and striking dissection and rebuilding of the adventure game, one that wraps itself well around the specs and strengths of the DS, but one that isn't the sum of its parts. But it is a worthy and touching whole, nonetheless. **[7]**



It's possible to play *Trace Memory* purely with the stylus if the player wishes to, and a persistently endearing touch is that Ashley's own inventory is handled by the Dual Another System handheld device – which is, literally, a DS by another name. Messages from Ashley's father are drip-fed to her via DAS carts, too



The game's use of the dual screens is effective and efficient from the very opening – as Ashley snoozes on the boat to Blood Edward Island, her dreams are shown on the upper display. Soon she meets D, a young ghost whose situation makes for an effective delivery of plot revelations



INTELLIGENT LICENSE

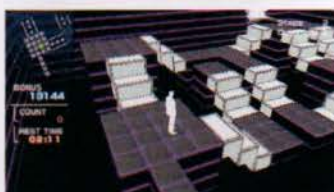
FORMAT: PSP PRICE: ¥4,800 (£24) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JPN)
PUBLISHER: NOW PRODUCTIONS DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

Intelligent License is a particularly authoritative title for a game – the kind that begins garnering it respect even before the Start button goes down. But in practice, that respect is produced by little more than an innate fear of failure: if a puzzle game proves difficult to appreciate (especially one that interprets our play according to Kyoto University professor Masuo Koyasu's 'Practical Intelligent Quotient'), you're as likely to blame yourself for that fact as you are the developer. However, in this theory-test of *Metal Gear Solid*-style VR puzzles, the fault ultimately lies behind the screen.

Most if not all of the game's challenges are well-conceived blueprints that, though they sometimes digress into rather obsolete tests of basic gaming skill, more often represent fine convolutions of traditional logic. The player must negotiate grid-defined obstacle courses of interlocking blocks, turnstiles, laser fences, concealed mazes and torch-wielding guards, along with doors responsive to either colour-coded button presses or applied weights, all against the clock. The goal is not only the glowing portal at the other side, but the respectable score earned by reaching it in a decisive manner.

Unfortunately, it's not just your own competence – or lack of it – that can hamper the game's appeal. Limited to forward and reverse views of the avatar (and the momentary swing that sees one become the other), the game's camera consistently fails to provide an adequate overview of the puzzle itself, meagre compensation being offered by a small overhead map. While the rule set and post-game analysis demand haste, the interface increasingly withholds the tools needed to efficiently think at speed.

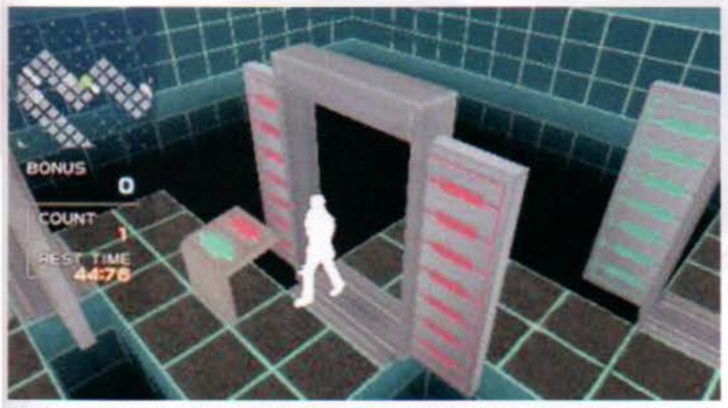




As its challenges become more ambitious, so the game's tendency to muddle them with a restricted viewpoint and dull them with its painstaking pace increases. In such an elemental game, this shortcoming proves difficult to forgive

As a consequence, the more it seeks to challenge the player, the more likely it becomes for the game to fail to provide either an enjoyable process of trial and error or a legitimate test of aptitude. As stages expand, so the block-shifting mechanic and movement system are strained, succumbing on many occasions to the numbing repetitiveness threatened by their meticulous nature.

An intelligent licence, then, with basic lessons yet to learn. **[5]**



The game gradually introduces its individual puzzles, such as the colour-coded door switches seen above, one at a time over its opening stage. Methodically thereafter, it mixes them to more cerebral effect



BLACK HAWK DOWN

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £30 RELEASE: SEPTEMBER 2
PUBLISHER: NOVALOGIC DEVELOPER: REBELLION
PREVIOUSLY IN: E115, E150



At the outset, *Black Hawk Down* gives players the first of many fixed gun emplacements to throw on the genre's creative pyre, the wild sensitivity of the Dual Shock pad forging challenge from clumsiness

Prospective owners of *Black Hawk Down* should be aware that, unlike the majority of ports, this is one of those games where two different studios have been tasked with its adaptation. While Climax has produced an Xbox version, it's Rebellion that has landed the honours for PS2. Considering the latter platform's stubborn drought of online titles, it's there that we're choosing to focus our attention.

Built upon the developer's own Azura engine, PS2 *Black Hawk Down* is another interpretation of Novalogic's original PC shooter, priding itself on a multiplayer mode that can pack 32 online players into a single match. It's a conditionally enjoyable experience, the right combination of open-air map, high player count and game type required to sidestep its flaws and savour what remains. Draw distance is decent and the weapons, for the most part, have some kick.



The Azura engine, well suited to the game's more arid and skeletal exteriors, has a harder time lifting its indoor environments from the mud

But beyond this limited overlap lies a game that only half hits its mark. Important identifiers such as grenade icons and weapon names are awkwardly vague, the former represented by barely helpful icons and the latter by homogenous model numbers, occasionally cooperative enough to bear a suffix such as 'shotgun'. The pyramid of damage, health and first-aid (available via other, medic-class players) is misjudged to the point where indoor environments become charnel houses of endless respawning.

Singleplayer is more palatable, offering a shoot 'em up that remains average without ever truly offending. Upgradeable attributes add a sense of progression, but rarely with tangible effect. Frustratingly, the game's on-rails sequences exacerbate its lack of invention, whipping up enemies that often inflict damage before their location is revealed. When a single rocket can end the game by killing either you or your entourage, this tests the patience more than a prosaic shooter has the right to.

Black Hawk Down rarely deviates from the PS2's commonest ground. Considering the degree to which it unravels when it does, we should probably be thankful. **[4]**


PlayStation.2



TIME EXTEND

SILENT HILL 3

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (KCET)**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE DATE: **2003**

The most controversial of the series has an unusual ace up its festering sleeve: normality

There are games named after their heroes; others named after their villains. There are a few – well, perhaps only one – named after their love interest. But *Silent Hill* is named, unusually, after its setting, and rightly so. However involving the stories, and however sympathetic the characters, it's the town that dominates – brooding, unsettling, unnerving. Which is why the idea that Silent Hill would make only a cameo appearance in one of its own games seemed at the time a concept as bizarre as a *Resident Evil* without zombies. But after two increasingly extensive street-by-street recreations – made uniquely bizarre by the Japanese interpretation of small-town Americana as much as by its twisted history – the developers were adamant that a geographic shift as well as a thematic one was necessary for reinvention. Player response to *Silent Hill 2*'s lengthy stretches (and lengthy nerve-stretchers) where nothing happened had also been duly noted, and it was decided that *Silent Hill 3* would address this with a new, more aggressive fear. The result was steeped in the schizophrenia of Silent Hill itself: both utterly predictable and utterly unexpected, an object lesson in the series' progressive themes and regressive gameplay.

Picking up from the events of the original title, to the extent of walking in

SH3's film-grained world of bruised, hazy tones creates an atmosphere where a makeshift sacrificial altar in a hospital (right) seems hardly out of place, yet a bathroom tap (below) practically thrums with menace. Some criticised the game for not building up to its shocks in the expected fashion, but the sense of disorientation it creates renders the entire game as one long, slow shock

DEAD CITY RADIO

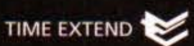
Series sound designer Akira Yamaoka took the chance with *SH3* that a horror game could be accepted with a more eclectic audio offering than a traditional horror game soundtrack – or even a traditional game one. Composing original lyricised songs for the opening, midsection and conclusion of the game with the intent of making the experience 'cinematic', the result is more graceful than that often misjudged aim suggests, even when a track is sung underneath the dialogue of the game's pivotal plot cut-scene. The spirited opening number is arguably *SH3*'s most immediately recognisable and memorable aspect – though series fans would not have been disappointed by familiar delicate synthesisers, metal bangs or absolute silences as the mood required.

its bloody footprints at the conclusion, *SH3* is a relentless roadtrip thriller, far removed from the introspective melancholy of the second game's Gothic love story. It opens with a fuzz of guitar rock not on Silent Hill's grey fog-banks, but the deep red sunset of Anywheresville, USA: late-teen heroine Heather self-sure and wilful where previous male leads (including, as players would discover, her father) dithered and doubted. Threatened by a chance encounter with her past as the Central Square mall hits closing time, shutters dropping and crowd wallah fading into the series' trademark isolation, her only concern is not with dramatic resolution, but simply to get home. First slipping behind the shopfronts into the mall's grimy innards, she then slips behind even that into its malignant Otherworld – given the right circumstances, it seemed Silent Hill was a state of mind rather than a plot of land.

Her eventual escape from the mall sees the world flicked back to an eerie, but more comfortably familiar, emptiness as she braves the subway to catch the last train home – although this takes her only as far as an unscheduled stop at an abandoned station. From there, Heather's path careens through disused underpasses and sewer channels, a construction site, an office block, her neighbourhood: each location sometimes supernaturally twisted, but more often as claustrophobic and forbidding as only suburbia can be. It's a tumble down the rabbit-hole of urban decay, of paint sloughing from walls, scarred concrete, off-white sodium glare, set to a litany of television static, faulty air-conditioning, dying machine noise. When areas transform into the Otherworld – which itself is a condemned building's fire-sale of chainlink fences and ultraviolet insect lights strung over diseased tilework – the difference no longer seems so extreme, more some sort of karmic sarcasm.

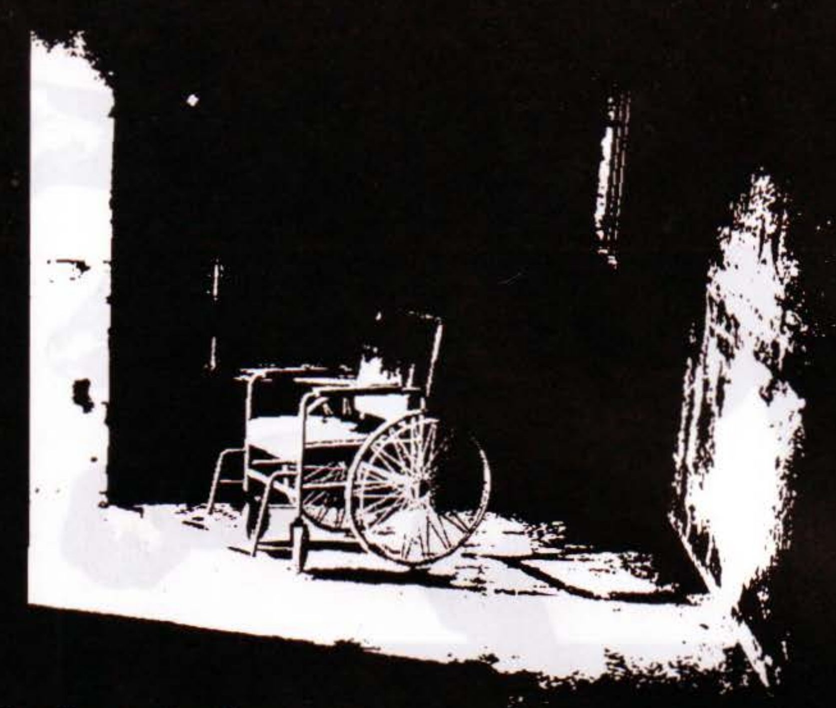
***Silent Hill* has** created a thoroughly modern vision of hell, a truly *urban* urban legend that thrives on making us mistrust the environment we live in – the very environment supposedly protecting us from primal fears of death and decay. By *SH3* the checklist of implicit danger from bathrooms, mirrors, televisions, stairwells, elevators and even closed

The carousel from the final throes of *SH1* makes a grim reprise, providing an unforgettable setpiece for a more forgettable boss encounter (an aspect with which the series has never been convincingly adept)





SH3 can pack an emotional punch. Most notable is a confessional scene before the final act that passes the burden of response to the player, knowing full well the actions they, and Heather, intend to take



doors is so great as to carry the whole first section of the game on a mounting wave of panic: the actual appearance of monsters is almost a relief, a chance to take refuge in something reassuringly unbelievable. This first section contains almost no plot exposition: it focuses entirely on the assumption – however naïve it will seem to us as horror-jaded observers – that Heather can get home, bolt the door against the outside world and be safe, if only for a moment. Of course, just as *SH2* offered the player companionship for just long enough to wrench it away, Heather returns to find herself cheated of that safe moment, discovering that Silent Hill has invaded not just her home turf but her home itself, and has evened an old score in the process.

It's at this point that the series' sadistic – if somehow uplifting – theme of breaking its lead characters' wills in order for them to forge a new reserve of determination is given its most expertly choreographed scene. When Heather's helpless grief turns to a thrill of rage upon realising her uninvited guests are still within striking distance, all the motivation for the game's second half is communicated in her reaction – conveyed in wordless detail as her face and her resolve visibly harden. The decision she makes will take her – and the game – back to their birthplace: Silent Hill. But like any return to a home town brought on by tragedy – even a town unable to wake from its nightmares – it's a fleeting visit, denying players the ability to aimlessly wander the familiar streets and instead pressing them grimly on.

The pilgrimage ends in the cloisters of a chapel – although the concept of an actual worldly location is lost in hallucinations so searing you can practically smell the blood



The warmth of Heather's home is numbed by the events that occur there: a tazer in her dresser hints that she hoped to be prepared

The previous appearances of scattered gurneys and abandoned wheelchairs that had marked Heather as a *Silent Hill* outpatient culminate in a dreaded hospital admission, and the discovery that its septic halls are not just haunted, but itching and burning in a fever-dream. Beyond that lies a cheerless return to the Lakeside Amusement Park, a nuclear wind howling through its metalled-over attractions, and the pilgrimage ends in the cloisters of a modest chapel – although the concept of an actual worldly location is lost in hallucinations so searing you can practically smell the stink of blood and brimstone. While some of the scenes will have the familiarity of a recurring dream for *Silent Hill* veterans – a stale breadcrumb trail preserved from 17 game years ago – the ending is



OUT OF TIMELINE

Though *SH3* takes place ten years after the events of *Silent Hill 2*, prerelease web imagery suggested that game's unhappy protagonist, James Sunderland, might make a fleeting appearance in Heather's story. While this proved not to be the case, it was possible to visit some of his old haunts, such as the Heaven's Night club (unchanged from *SH2*, as is the sliver of downtown Silent Hill explorable in the game, for either supernatural or asset-recycling reasons). A completed *SH2* savegame will trigger a fittingly rueful visual reference inside the club, as well as several more throwaway textual in-jokes. For the most part, Sunderland's collision course with his repressed memories seems to stand alone from the series' relentless desire to tie every scrap of in-game information into a sprawling, untidy occult metaplot – though both *SH2* and *SH3* feature elements foreshadowing the storyline of the fourth title, *The Room*.





SEXY AND VIOLENT

In an admission that repeat playthroughs won't be quite so emotionally fraught (though an unpleasant surprise or two await), *SH3* dispenses with the helpless ingenue routine and breaks out the heavy weapons. A laser sword, an unlimited-ammunition Uzi and a flamethrower can all be acquired before entering the first Otherworld – making light work of the 333 monster deaths required to unlock the Heather Beam, an over-the-top anime-styled psychic attack. In concert with Heather's Princess Heart costume, it upgrades to the Sexy Beam, with which Heather can strut through the depths of Hell with looks that literally kill. It can't be faulted for self-mocking kitsch – and *SH3*'s customary surreal ending sequence can only be triggered by a Sexy Beam rampage – but the game's flailing slap-fights offer little replay value compared to *Resident Evil 4*'s brain matter-splattering catharsis.







There are few better set-ups for plot exposition than an all-night drive through the rain to a forbidding destination – it's a shame that hapless private investigator Douglas' voice actor never quite settles into his role or their budding awkward friendship. As is common for the series, conversations are always intimate, one-on-one affairs

new: formed not from a cluster of inconclusive suggestions, but with Heather's triumph, and a stake neatly through the heart of the original storyline.

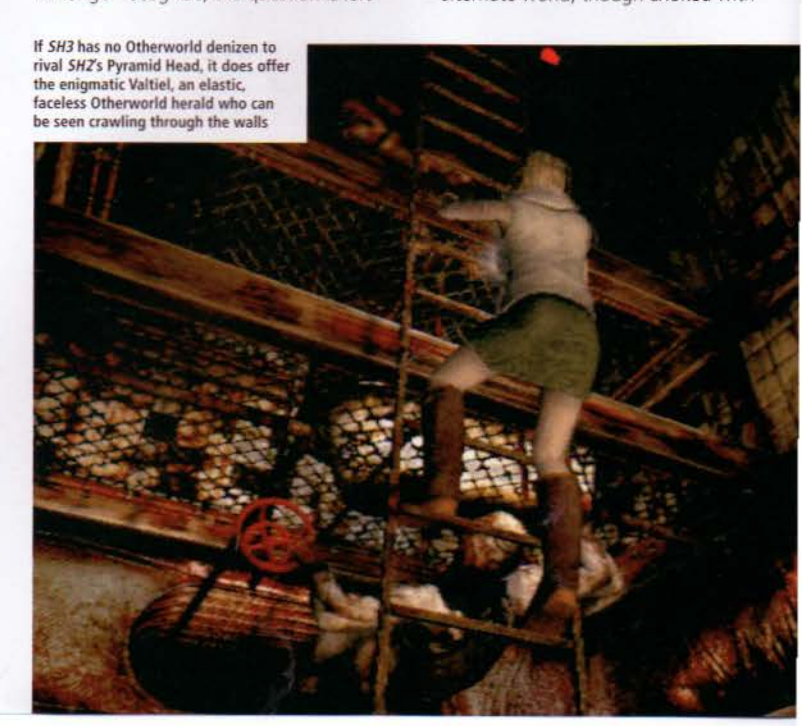
For series fans who loved the uncertainty left by *Silent Hill*'s overwrought plot strands (the original game's director, Keiichiro Toyama, would move on to produce the even more fastidiously plotted *Siren*), this was reason enough to feel shortchanged by *SH3*: to see it as abandoning 'smart' horror for the cruder adrenaline rush of a plunge into darkness, violence and absolute resolution. In theory, it should be appreciated as a masterclass in the series' ability to radically shift its tone with each game, but in practice, however much it was intended to play as an action game, the basic survival horror template remains too clumsy to make it work as such – lock-and-key puzzles unnecessarily lift the brick from the accelerator, and combat, as ever, proves a chore unless you simply run around monsters. The majority of *SH3*'s freakshows are as lethargic as they are appallingly misshapen, doing too little to spur on the chase in the early stages, then failing to be sufficiently threateningly when the reflex turns from flight to fight.

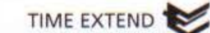
It's frustrating considering the game lacks neither the material nor the ability to override clumsy mechanics with complex emotion: the final descent finds you and Heather flushed with righteous revenge and shotgun shells, needing little encouragement to gun down the chapel's murderous residents. As with the previous titles, it's in the moments when you're running on raw emotion that *SH3* best twists the knife – Heather is admonished after her shoot-first-and-stamp-on-skulls-later entrance with an incredulous allegation of: "They look like monsters to you?" A play to every *Silent Hill* player's secret fear that the only monster is the protagonist, bludgeoning their way through a reality their troubled minds can no longer recognise, the question is left hanging long enough for Heather to gasp in horror, a beat, and then: "Don't worry: it's just a joke."



Such arch playfulness sets *SH3* apart from its too-serious contemporaries in the horror genre. The Otherworld incarnation of the shopping mall sports store is a medieval torture chamber; the Lakeside Amusement Park mascot Robby the Rabbit is somehow less disturbing sprawled in death than the imagined reality of shepherding children with that glassy eyed, rictus grin. Even more overt is a detour through the Borley Haunted Mansion attraction, where *SH3*'s jump-scare-punctuated haunted house ride gleefully, literally becomes a jump-scare-punctuated haunted house ride. It reinforces the sense that the game isn't just out to scare – and it scares less than its predecessors – but to suggest that its alternate world, though choked with

If *SH3* has no Otherworld denizen to rival *SH2*'s Pyramid Head, it does offer the enigmatic Valtiel, an elastic, faceless Otherworld herald who can be seen crawling through the walls









On mirrors, on floors, on paper and taped to windows, the cult's symbol is always one step ahead of Heather's travels, its unwelcome connotations at odds with its use as a savepoint







Heather gets most of the memorable one-liners (and a heartfelt final battlecry), but Vincent occasionally steals the sallow spotlight. It's refreshing to find a horror cast with tongues sometimes as sharp as their knives



suffering and disease, isn't so far removed from the dementia of the real one.

This unwritten narrative – the one told through the game's locations and Heather's actions in them – has cohesion where the game's script seems to be phasing between two worlds of its own. On one level it's as clumsy and artificial as is expected from the genre, dousing any spark the dialogue could strike. On the other it's marked by unexpectedly caustic outbursts and genuinely affecting soul-searching. Heather fares best, with enthusiastic delivery of even her most stilted lines, but the supporting cast's generally wooden readings fail to capitalise on their character quirks: it's poorly communicated that Douglas is more father-figure-for-hire than private detective, or that villain Claudia's incessant sermonising isn't simply plot exposition but an attempt to keep her eyes sewn tightly shut against where her blind faith is taking her. As a side effect, Heather's stronger characterisation ensures she is the story's focal point; the constant references to fairytales and legends cast her as a 21st century princess facing down a wicked witch, and not just a blunt instrument to unearth the plot.

It lays claim to the nameless dread when you're waiting for a train on an empty subway platform, fumbling for your keys in an apartment block stairwell under a striplight

Yet there are still plenty of missed opportunities in her asides to the player, encapsulated best when examining a gibbet in Lakeside only to be told: "There's a dead body inside this box thing. There's nothing interesting here." Too flat to even be explained as a comment on the unflappability of American youth, such jarringly misjudged feedback spoils the sense that *everything* is morbidly interesting, even though you know you shouldn't look. At other times, the sharing of incidental details – from Heather recently quitting smoking to her fear of mirrors – provides a simple, easy intimacy that sweetens the press-X-on-everything ritual. Strangely, some of the best text from the Japanese script has been lost in the localisation, such as her slyly self-aware rumination at a savepoint on the concept of dying and being forced to live again.

Perhaps *SH3* is not as different to the second game as the designers or their audience claim: both want so desperately to be something more than a survival horror, yet both are unwilling or unable to rework their core structure to play to the strengths of their production. Both rely so heavily on their choking atmosphere at the expense of all else that repeat playthroughs can never match the experience of the first time, whether of slow-burning horror or of blazing urgency. But if *SH3* is to be considered a misguided experiment, trying to please all the people and ending up loved by few, its impact may yet outlive all *Silent Hill*'s usual cast of apocalyptic cults and slumbering, vengeful gods, or its filmic homages and horror in-jokes. Instead, it lays claim to the nameless dread when you're waiting for a train on an empty subway platform, fumbling for your keys in an apartment block stairwell under a fluttering striplight, or being the last to leave the office after the lights have dimmed and the building has become tomb-quiet. *SH3*'s lingering horror is that the everyday can seem poised to turn pitilessly hostile far beyond some storybook Bad Place. And so, despite starting out miles away from Silent Hill itself, the game ends by making it closer to home than it's ever been before – not just for Heather, but for anyone who shared her twisted, twisting journey.



THE MAKING OF...
JAMES POND II: ROBOCOD

Computer games have often yearned to look like their console brethren – and here's a UK-sourced example that pulled it off

ORIGINAL FORMAT: **AMIGA** PUBLISHER: **EA** DEVELOPER: **MILLENNIUM** ORIGIN: **UK** RELEASE DATE: **1991**

Some things never change: long before the firstperson shooter made itself into a me-too format-selling omnipresence, the garish, grinning platforming mascot fulfilled that role for consoles in the early '90s. Often a throwaway characterisation based on a seemingly random animal, many never got a second chance to make their mark, but James Pond's came in the form of *RoboCod*, a successful sequel to the original *James Pond* game and one that was still seeing conversions to other formats in more recent times, namely the GBA and PlayStation.

But some things do change: the role of Millennium's **Chris Sorrell** on *RoboCod* was one more befitting of the umbrella-like responsibilities of a bedroom coder. Sorrell oversaw both programming and graphics for the title, although that's not so much half a lie as half of the truth: "I did about 70 per cent of the coding, assisted by a Mega Drive programmer, Simeon Pashley, who was concurrently converting from the original Amiga code as well as coding most of the game's bosses. Another programmer, Alan McCarthy, joined us towards the end and assisted with some disk routines. On the art side I again did about 70 per cent of the graphics, assisted by Leavon Archer. The game design was mostly mine, while Steve Bak did most of the level mapping in addition to running our little studio. Being in a position to both code and do your own graphics is fun – and very empowering – and definitely something I miss from that era." And did this all-in approach work? "To a reasonable extent..." says Sorrell.

But back to Pond himself, an action-hero pun that doubled the strength of its cheese with *RoboCod*. With such a neat spoof of a title, which came first, the game or the literal cod-pun? "*RoboCod* all started with the new name. I'd just watched and loved RoboCop, and the name just hit me – a way to continue the wacky naming trend, and using the cybernetic cues from RoboCop, to take him somewhere new. I also liked how the gritty uberviolence of RoboCop juxtaposed with a metal-clad cartoon fish! The rest of the concept quickly fell into place around

"It was the era of cutesy gaming mascots and I wanted my own. Nobody had done a fish and I figured I could make a fun character"

the new character developments, borrowing a whole bunch of things from gaming culture and beyond.

"As for the original game, it was the era of cutesy gaming mascots and I wanted to make my own. Nobody had done a fish and I figured I could make a fun character *and* he'd have an interesting world to play in. The leap to calling him James Pond was





MAGIC SPELLINGS

One cherished aspect of certain 8- and 16bit games are those cheats or passwords that were so oft-used or inventive that, for some, they became an unforgettable part of the momories associated with those titles. *RoboCod* was obliging in this regard, as Sorrell explains: "The classic 'cheat' for *RoboCod* was quite fun: staring you in the face on the very first screen are five bonus items, whose names start with the letters C (cake), H (hammer), E (Earth), A (apple), and T (tap). Collect them in that order and hey presto…" Other cryptic capitalised combinations included POWER (penguin, oil, wine, Earth, racquet) and LIVES (lips, ice cream, violin, Earth, snowman).



Sorrell has some light to shed on *RoboCod's* predecessor, too: "The first *James Pond* game was the first European-developed Sega Mega Drive game, and it was the beginning of our relationship with EA. Its gameplay was loosely inspired by Andrew Braybrook's first – and my favourite – game: *Gribbly's Day Out*"

made fairly early on by Millennium's MD, as I'd called him Guppy up to that point. I wasn't sure initially, but I quickly realised how much pun potential there was beyond that simple name. The rest, as they say, is fishtory… Sorry."

Aside from blossoming from a cheap but massively memorable wisecrack, was *RoboCod's* direction of development simply to bring a console-flavoured title to the Amiga? "In the early months of working on *RoboCod* I had just discovered 16bit consoles. I instantly fell in love with Mario, and, yes, I wanted to try and capture some console goodness on the Amiga. It was definitely a case of making the kind of game I wanted to play and, after *James Pond's* moderate success, Millennium was happy to let me get on with it."

And was it just *Super Mario World* that drove Sorrell to shape *RoboCod* the way he did? "It was definitely Miyamoto, but also Capcom – especially *Ghouls 'n' Ghosts*. *Mickey's Magical Quest* on the Mega Drive was another one. Added to this, even a few years after their true glory days, I still had a real burning desire to make games in the style Andrew Braybrook and Jeff Minter used to describe in the Zzap!64 diaries that I used to read so avidly during my school years."

This gap that *RoboCod* was built to plug is a rather curious one, however, considering the success of a game such as the Amiga/ST conversion of *Rainbow Islands*, and the fact that publishers are always quick to copy and convert. Why wasn't there a flood of such titles already present or inbound? "I used to wonder that myself at the time," says Sorrell. "Perhaps it was because a lot of the big international players were focusing their efforts on the Mega Drive and SNES; we were caught between the end of the bedroom coding era and the establishment of the major development studios.

"I think maybe the UK was a bit slower to catch on to the potential of the console market and instead we largely stuck with our Amigas and STs. As far as those platforms were concerned, they might have been great computers, but I think they both underperformed as games machines. Trying to get a good console game out of the ST was like pulling teeth, and even the Amiga was pretty underpowered – scrolling was surprisingly expensive and the hardware sprites were lousy. Previously, I'd done quite a bit of programming on the C64 when I should have been doing homework; for its day it was definitely a better gaming platform. A feature like *RoboCod's* extending body was just one of those brainwaves that occasionally hits, and actually stemmed from thinking about the one thing that Amiga hardware sprites offered: free, unlimited height.

"Aside from a certain amount of time pressure – then, as ever – I can honestly say that when I look back on that era, I just remember them as happy days. The first *Pond* game had done OK, but there was no unreasonable expectation for *RoboCod* – that helped. The game came together so smoothly and in such a relatively short amount of time – about nine months – that it was just a simple, pleasurable development experience." Pond's telescoping body was one of its standout characteristics,

"Trying to get a good console game out of the ST was like pulling teeth, and even the Amiga was pretty underpowered"



***RoboCod's* look was typical of that chunky, vivid and garish style present in many an Amiga platformer; its sprites are discernibly western in style when compared to those of the likes of, say, *Rainbow Islands*, whose origins lay at Taito**



along with screen-filling bosses, chunky colours and huge levels; something so capable must have offered up a healthy challenge during development. But Sorrell has his own take on what was the game's biggest achievement: "That it introduced the concept of a cybernetic fish in a flying bath-tub to gaming! Or actually that it was one of the first real 'mascot' platformers on the Amiga. I felt that a few games that followed, namely *Harlequin*, *Superfrog* and especially *Zool*, borrowed more than a little from *RoboCod*'s mood and themes."

Not to mention one aspect that would remain a perennial aspect for publishers – product placement. How did the game's heavy advertising for Penguin biscuits come about? Was such sponsorship actively pursued, or was the publisher approached with an offer? "That was down to Millennium and specifically their MD's keen pursuit of additional revenue streams! It was presented as something that they strongly wanted to include in the game, but wasn't forced upon us. Given the cutesy, abstract world that *RoboCod* occupied, I actually didn't mind the idea – especially considering that we had a 'sweets' level where those Penguin wrappers could fit right in. In a way it felt like the Penguin element actually added something to the oddball, eclectic mix of content that the game contained."

Oddball and eclectic is certainly true. Despite *RoboCod*'s pseudo-festive theme, the rulebook for generic platforming level themes didn't appear to ever be consulted. *RoboCod*'s richly coloured sweetshops – literally, for one level – were home to bored-looking submarines and boss-eyed vehicles, myriad props with cartoon-like eyes. Little of each level's furniture escaped the stroke of such an imaginative brush. Explains Sorrell: "Obviously, this was back in the days of 'anything goes', when games were almost expected to be brash, bold and abstract – so liberating by modern standards! I wanted to capture the vibrancy of the console games I was starting to see, and to be able to exploit some things I knew the Amiga was good at, such as the 'copper-bar' colour effects I'd become pretty proficient at using in the first *James Pond*. I hit upon the toy factory concept as a way of loosely justifying a really diverse range of themes – basically anything I could think of that had strong identity and potential for fun. I always loved *Thing On A Spring* on the C64 too, and undoubtedly some of that seeped into the game. Really it was just a case of packing in as many zany, quirky and off-the-wall ideas as we had time for.

"As for the bosses, they all grew out of the themes of their host levels, as you might expect. The gameplay invariably came about from myself, Leavon and Simeon just bouncing around ideas. In all cases we were trying to come up with the craziest stuff we could; I think the fat ballerina was one of the most notable."

Sorrell is still significantly active in game production, currently on *24* at Sony Studio Cambridge after having worked on *Primal*, *Ghost Hunter* and *Medievil* for SCEE. What lessons, if any, did the creation of the *James Pond* series offer? "Just to get on and do your thing. Believe in what you're doing and don't get caught up chasing what you *think* everyone else is up to. Unfortunately, I pretty much forgot all that when working on *James Pond 3*, and I spent too much of the development time chasing after what Sonic had just achieved. Not that Sorrell's work on *RoboCod* will be at all detectable in his next title, as he offers up the only common thread between the two: "Development of both has involved keyboards. I think that's about it!"



***RoboCod* has a romantic skeleton lurking in its cupboard: "During development of *RoboCod* I met my future wife and, in a staggeringly tacky move, there's a bonus room tucked away in the game with a backdrop of initialled parallax hearts"**



Two more *Pond* games were made – *James Pond 3: Operation Starfish* and *Aquatic Games With James Pond* – before the franchise went into hibernation. Arguably, neither of them quite matched *RoboCod*



Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Funcom

DATE FOUNDED: 1993

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 130

HEAD OF STUDIO: Trond Arne Aas (below)





Dreamfall is the high-profile sequel to the acclaimed adventure *The Longest Journey*

URL: www.funcom.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY

The Longest Journey (PC), *Anarchy Online* and expansion packs (PC), *Casper The Friendly Ghost* (PS1), *Championship Motorcross* (PS1), *Speed Freaks* (PS1), *Fatal Fury* (Mega CD), *NBA Hangtime* (Mega Drive), *Samurai Showdown* (Mega CD), *Pocahontas* (Mega Drive), *Winter Gold* (SNES)

KEY STAFF:

Gaute Godager (game director, *Age of Conan*)
Ragnar Tørnquist (creative director, game director, *Dreamfall*)
Nicolay Nickelsen (VP, business development)
Ole Schreiner (project director, *Dreamfall* and *Anarchy Online*)
Didrik Tollefsen (art director, *Age Of Conan*)
Christer Sveen (art director, *Dreamfall*)
Jørgen Tharaldsen (product director)





Age Of Conan: Hyborian Adventures takes dramatic advantage of one of the most valuable licences in the world currently untapped by videogaming





LOCATIONS:

Oslo, Norway
Beijing, China,
Durham, US
Zurich, Switzerland

CURRENT PROJECTS:

Dreamfall: The Longest Journey (PC, Xbox; Funcom/ Micro Application), *Anarchy Online: Lost Eden* (PC; Funcom), *Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures* (PC – Funcom), unannounced online action RPG (PC, console; Funcom)

PROPRIETARY TECHNOLOGY

"Funcom is Europe's premier massively multiplayer developer, focused on taking adventure games and massively multiplayer games to the next level with *Dreamfall* and *Age Of Conan*, as well as taking online RPGs to the next-gen consoles with an unannounced online RPG project.

"Our real-combat engine is a revolutionary new approach to combat in online RPGs where you are in direct control of your character and where you strike, in realtime. The system predicts the result in the case of lag. BCC, a new behaviour control centre, has been designed from scratch for *Conan*; the system pulls in all control data and links it with character actions (combat, animations, emotes, formations, etc). The proprietary BCC system is data-driven, and gives designers full control over character behaviour, as opposed to a programmer coding it.

"Cheetah, our shader-orientated proprietary render engine, has been rewritten from scratch with a phong per-pixel lighting system. This unique engine allows for stunning graphics and ambience. Moreover, we have a Perlin noise-based cloud-generating system outdoing what we have seen in competing titles. This procedural system allows for extremely realistic weather behaviour.

"The new AI coming up in future Funcom online games rests on Maslow's need-based hierarchy, meaning all NPCs have certain desires which need to be fulfilled (hunger, attention, etc). The AI is also based around sights, hearing and smell, with reach calculated by, for example, the direction of the wind. This allows for a unique dynamic-programmed AI system taking NPCs in online games to the next level.

"Funcom also has internal technology solutions for *Dreamfall*, and we have taken the licensed Shark graphics engine and worked on improving its quality. *Dreamfall* has its own content-creation engine which has been in development since '96. It has branched out into one system for online games (Genesis) and one for our adventure titles (Laidback). It is a great engine for adventure titles with their focus on storytelling and dialogue trees, while giving designers more flexibility and freedom in terms of content implementation.

"As you can see, Funcom is focused on taking its proprietary technology to the next level."

Codeshop

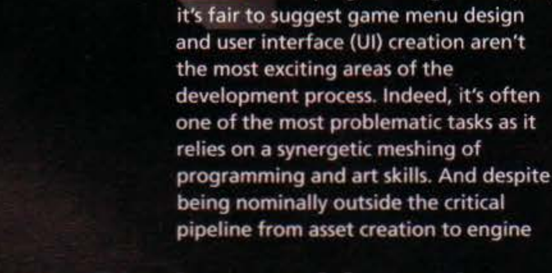
Tracking developments in development



Serving up a menu of delights

User interface is the latest area of game development to be supplied by the burgeoning middleware tools providers

In a culture dominated by the promise of sexy new boxes and exotic programming techniques, it's fair to suggest game menu design and user interface (UI) creation aren't the most exciting areas of the development process. Indeed, it's often one of the most problematic tasks as it relies on a synergetic meshing of programming and art skills. And despite being nominally outside the critical pipeline from asset creation to engine integration and game logic, it remains highly vulnerable to last-minute revisions and hence is usually one of the last pieces of work to be completed. Yet potentially menu design should be a straightforward problem to solve, not least from a technological point of view.



UI creation is a problematic task as it relies on a meshing of programming and art skills



It's this combination of hard and easy that explains the recent flurry of activity from companies offering specialist middleware to help developers overcome the problem.

Set up in March, French vendor Omegame already seems to be finding an enthusiastic audience for its Menus Master. "Our schedule at E3 was full for the three days. We couldn't even find five minutes to leave our meeting room to see what was happening at the show," half-complains product evangelist **Sébastien Kohn**. "So the reaction has been very positive. Most of the developers we met are interested in evaluating Menus Master, which demonstrates there's definitely a demand for this kind of product."

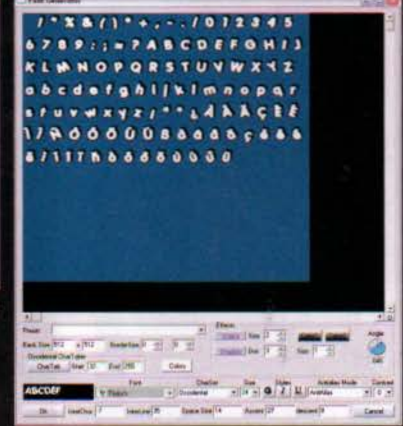
There's similar feedback from US company Scaleform (previously known as Sonic Fusion), which is working on publicly releasing its GFC Complete package in early 2006. First demonstrated at the 2005 Game Developer Conference, work-in-progress tools have been released to select customers. "The response from game developers has been very positive," says Scaleform CEO **Brendan Iribe**. "Several of the biggest names in the industry have already begun to develop their next AAA titles using GFC."

The key feature for both products is that they provide a cross-platform and programming-lite environment for UI development and design, which is independent from the rest of the development process. This means artists and designers have the space to create the appropriate ergonomics and aesthetics for a game within their own working environment.

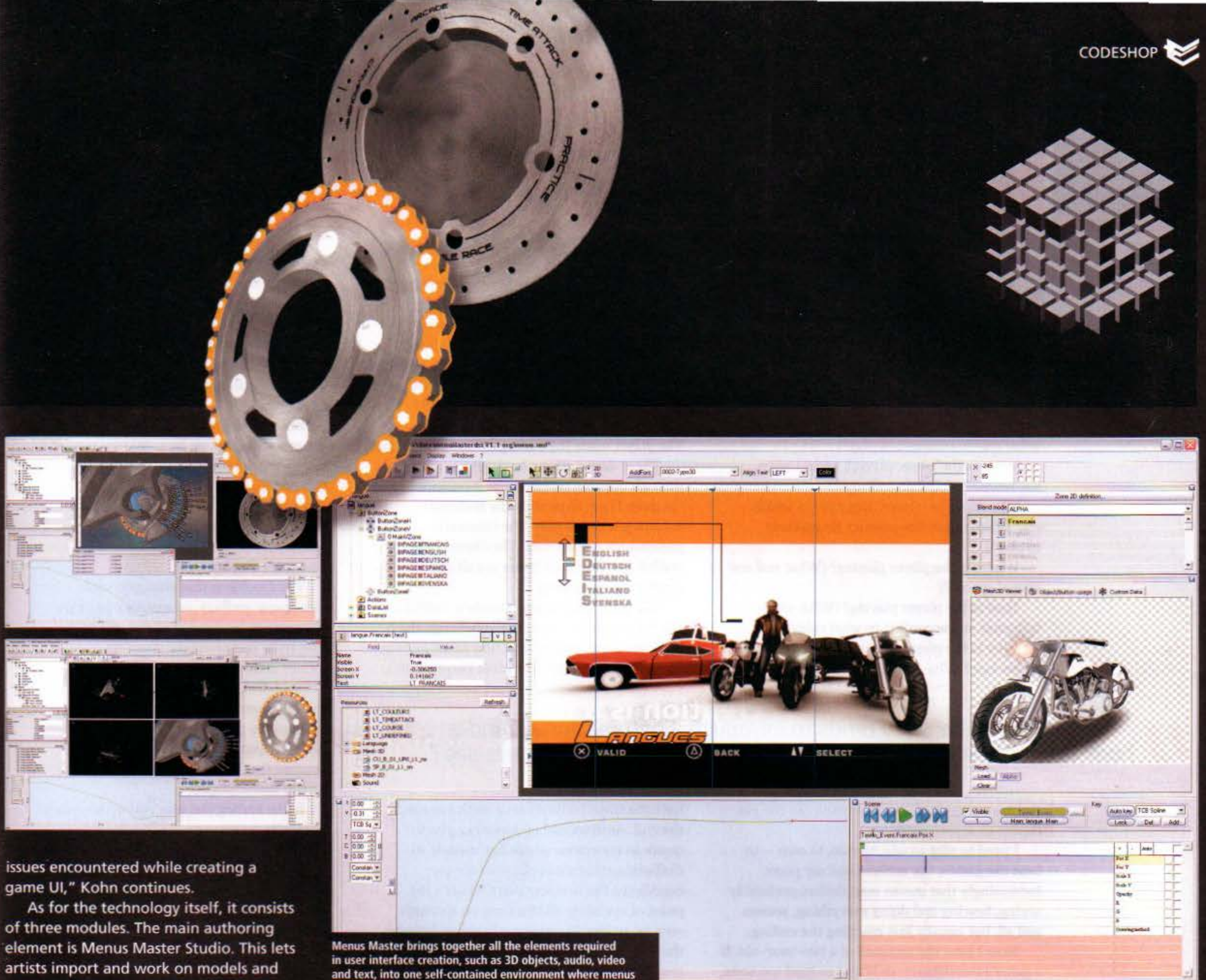
"We say Menus Master allows you to author up to 80 per cent of the game UI, without any programming assistance," says Kohn. "Programming is only needed at the end of the project, when the UI has to be plugged in the game."

Originally developed as an internal tool by defunct French developer Delphine, the brains behind Menus Master are Nicolas Perret and Alain Tinarrage, the technical leads on such games as the *MotoRacer* series and *Fade To Black*. "It's important to point out that Menus Master was made by industry veterans who are well aware of the





One of the advantages of user interface development tools such as Menus Master is easing the localisation process, thanks to support for multiple languages including Unicode for Japanese and Chinese. It also has an internal font generation element



Menus Master brings together all the elements required in user interface creation, such as 3D objects, audio, video and text, into one self-contained environment where menus and interactions can be set up by artists, not programmers

issues encountered while creating a game UI," Kohn continues.

As for the technology itself, it consists of three modules. The main authoring element is Menus Master Studio. This lets artists import and work on models and animations from packages such as 3DS Max and Maya as well as combining these with video, audio and text, all within a realtime WYSIWYG interface. It uses an open architecture meaning at the start of a project, a programmer can write a driver which means the WYSIWYG previewing runs on the game engine itself, ensuring the UIs created in Menus Master Studio are exactly the same as the UIs running in the finished game. Menus Master Studio also contains a font generator and helps localisation by enabling different language fields for created text, including Unicode support for languages such as Japanese and Chinese.

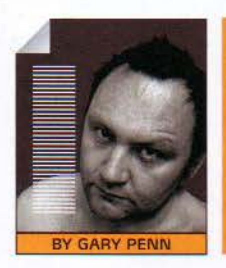
After this process, the game's user interface data is then created by the data generator module. This translates the game UI into data usable by Menus Master development kit (its SDK), as well as optimising it for the specific file formats required for the different game platforms. The ability to share common resources in this way makes Menus Master an important tool for developers creating titles across several platforms, claims Kohn.

"When you switch from one platform to another, the specific resources are loaded and you immediately see on screen your game UI on the selected platform," he says. "For instance, you could switch from a PSone game UI to an Xbox 360 game UI. You would keep the sounds, but the image resolution would increase, the PSone X button would become a green Xbox button and you would get antialiasing too."

The final element of Menus Master is the SDK, or development kit, which is how programmers integrate the complete user interface within the actual game code.

So in future, the result of using such middleware should be a more streamlined – and hence quicker and cheaper – interface creation process for developers. "GFC Complete is designed to drastically reduce the burden and expense of complex user interface creation," agrees Iribe. "Based on our initial customer feedback, we're confident GFC Complete will make quite a splash when it's released next year."

"I think UI middleware market will be good because game UI is a critical element," emphasises Kohn. "The user interface is the first contact a player has with a game, and the player has to deal with it every time they play the game. Of course, we realise a good user interface will never make a good game, but don't forget, an irritating user interface is the quickest way to make someone stop playing your game, however excellent its other qualities."



BY GARY PENN

MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

Why?

Why do you play? From a development perspective, it's usually the hardest question to answer. Journalists typically ask themselves six questions when writing a story. Who? What? Where? How? Why? When? The same questions have equal pertinence in game design and development.

Who is the player? (Who is likely to play? What role is assumed in play?)

What is the player playing with? (What hardware, peripherals and toys?)

When are the players playing? (In which era? When might the product be available to play?)

Where is the player playing? (What real and virtual spaces?)

How is the player playing? (With what influence and according to what rules?)

Why is the player playing? (Why should the player care? Why should the player pay to play and keep playing? What moments can the player expect to appreciate?)

I used to play to win, to rule, to own – to beat the games, the authors and my peers. Increasingly that meant completion: preferably seeing, hearing and doing everything, secrets and all, but usually just reaching the ending.

Now I have the patience of a two-year-old. If a game's too slippery, or bites too hard too soon, I drop it like it's hot. For me, the taking part is everything and winning means nothing. I'm more interested in performing satisfying activities – distinctive portions of play – and making my own entertainment, not completing challenges to exorcise excess testosterone. Pure play, not games.

Renowned writing authority Robert McKee says 'Wow them at the end and you've got a hit'. That may well be true of the more traditional forms of storytelling but with the playable incarnations the endings are never as accessible. The end for most players is only in tears: losing, equivalent to losing the plot or your place in a story. The player made the ending by being inadequate.

These days a strong beginning – whether through opening ceremony or moments of play – is more likely to provide the necessary encouragement to play. The cinematic pretensions of *Half-Life*, *The Chronicles Of Riddick* and *Medal Of Honor* are all effective at getting the ball rolling.

The addition of a story tends to introduce a natural closure – an overall challenge and a hook for a true ending. But how many endings do most players ever see? Most players don't have the time, inclination or ability to reach the end. Authors end up sweating piss to create an enormous whole but make it so challenging that most players only ever experience the first few parts. What's the point of spending all this time on so much seen by so few? If finality other than losing is the order of the day, the experience can't be too big, long or hard – it has to leave you feeling contented but wanting more.

> The addition of a story tends to introduce a natural closure and a hook for a true ending. But how many endings do most players see?

That said, with games the ending doesn't necessarily mean the experience is over as it is with conventional forms of entertainment. Sometimes you get the chance to tie up all the loose ends or do your own thing. (Not in *Beyond Good & Evil*, annoyingly, not without starting a new game.) Typically, though, once the climax has been savoured there's little incentive for anyone other than the obsessive to experience the pain all over again, even if the endings are known to vary according to player performance (*Rainbow Islands*, *Metal Gear Solid*).

'Know your ending'. It's a classic screenwriting tip, no less valid for computer and videogame authors – and even players to a certain degree (players have to at least know there is an ending). Whether that ending is the more traditional sporting or televisual ceremony or a more contemporary cinematic display.

The trouble is that computer and videogame endings are usually one of the last parts to be developed and one of the first to be compromised when time and money start to run out. Endings have a habit of disappointing, not just because they represent no more play. Anyone who bothered to persevere with *Halo 2* may have enjoyed the ride but would have reached the destination feeling more than a little shortchanged.

Is the ending the very end – the review or results ceremony – or does it include the play just before? In *Halo*, the literal race to the finish could be considered a key part of the ending. *Ico*'s tough pre-ending play made the prize all the sweeter, with no obvious means to resume or save the state of play and a tortuous assault course to navigate.

Of course, it would have turned sour if the final ceremony turned out to be nothing more than a few choice words. The ending, like all other ceremonies before it, has to be appropriate for the amount of effort put into triggering it.

Gary Penn began his career on Zzap!64, before working at BMG and DMA Design. He now makes games at Denki



Illustration: tatokes


BY TIM GUEST

THE GUEST COLUMN

Virtual religion

Videogames are a godless bunch. At worst, they're full of upside-down crosses and human sacrifices; at best there is a god, but you're it – which is surely blasphemy or idolatry, or something. In fact, videogames are arguably the final stage in the death of God; not only is he gone, but the son has replaced the father. We make the world now.

William Gibson has written about the gods of cyberspace (weirdly, he nabbed them from Haitian voodoo). But when we lose something in an online world, or something happens we feel is unfair, we don't look to the heavens – we IM the GM. Where is the virtual old man in the sky? Does he exist, or are we truly alone?

We all know about the decline in western church attendance. Only 1.6 per cent of UK residents regularly attend Sunday mass; even Pope Benedict XVI is famous for his vision of a smaller, more faithful church. Now some churches have begun to turn to the internet to help shepherd their flock. The Anglican Church has set up an 'i-church', with its own virtual pastor, to explore worship online and Reverend Alan Bain from Bath runs regular sermons streamed over the web. But there's also a new way to conquer the distances between worshippers; in Christianity, a new kind of transubstantiation is afoot.

It's a church you can visit from anywhere in the world. You can attend a sermon, talk, whisper, kneel in prayer, extend a hand or raise both arms in rapture. Of course, you know where we're heading, a five-year-old would. (In fact, a five-year-old did. As one visitor explained, she had her five-year-old son on her lap. His first question was: "Who's on my team? Which ones do I kill?").

It's a virtual church, sponsored by the Methodist Church, with virtual parishioners, virtual pews, and virtual pillars that turn transparent so you can watch yourself pass. The walls are lined with modern, rebellious Christian virtual art like Albert Herbert's Jesus Falls Under The Cross. There's a virtual hymn board, a virtual stained glass window, a virtual pulpit. There's even virtual traffic noise. Downstairs, there's a virtual Holy Water vending machine. There's no virtual collection plate but, for a while, people could contribute from their mobile phones. From May to August 2004 you could have attended this virtual church, The Church of Fools, with on average 8,000 other people (the size of a cathedral congregation) every day. The church was open 24 hours, and free of vandalism. They did discover a new kind of problem, however.

> When we first enter our new virtual worlds, we feel a new freedom from the inhibition that holds us back in the real world

When we first enter our new virtual worlds, we feel a new freedom from the inhibition that holds us back in the real world. With less at stake, we say more. Richard Chartres, the Anglican Bishop of London, addressed the virtual church's opening congregation. As he spoke, some of his virtual flock wandered around, pointed at him, and swore. Then, people arrived with racist names, or pushed themselves forcefully on the female congregation. More than once, Satan himself appeared, logged in and climbed the pulpit. Church of Fools editor **Simon Jenkins** approached one such Beelzebub for a chat. "What are you doing?" he asked. "Who is this who dares approach the Evil One?" Satan shouted. "Well... I'm the church warden," Jenkins replied. Satan then became, he said, "disappointingly contrite." Soon after, they closed off the pulpit area to the public.

The Church of Fools is jokey, but it isn't a joke. Jenkins makes the comparison with John Wesley, who took the gospel to the streets and fields and was egged for his trouble. In cyberspace, though, the main trouble seems to come from not from staunch traditionalists, but from those who, as Jenkins puts it, want to "experience the joy of saying 'fuck' in a church."

When I visited, the congregation discussed their worship in hushed tones. People prayed in many languages. For the Lord's Prayer, everyone really did type it out. The organ streamed music and people typed hymn lyrics. I spoke to a few; one told me to 'piss off you religious mug', but many said they really felt they were in a church.

The church is closed now, although at www.churchoffools.com you can still drop by for an individual visit. On the last day, co-editor **Steve Goddard** spoke with the packed congregation. He compared his feelings to Paul writing to the Romans, whom he felt he knew, even though they'd never met. Goddard called the virtual church 'a new meditative window.' "Never having met someone, not seeing them, not being physically with them, doesn't imply lack of reality, depth and care as far as Paul was concerned." It needn't be that way for us, either.

"Wherever two or more are gathered in my name, there I am," Jesus apparently said. Whether our online worlds are inhabited by God or not, there's certainly something that arises when we gather together – sometimes community, sometimes purpose, sometimes excessive, unnecessary swearing. Perhaps the hero of *Doom* isn't alone clearing demons from Mars. Maybe someone walks alongside him.

Tim Guest is an author and veteran videogame/technology journalist. His book, My Life In Orange, is published by Granta

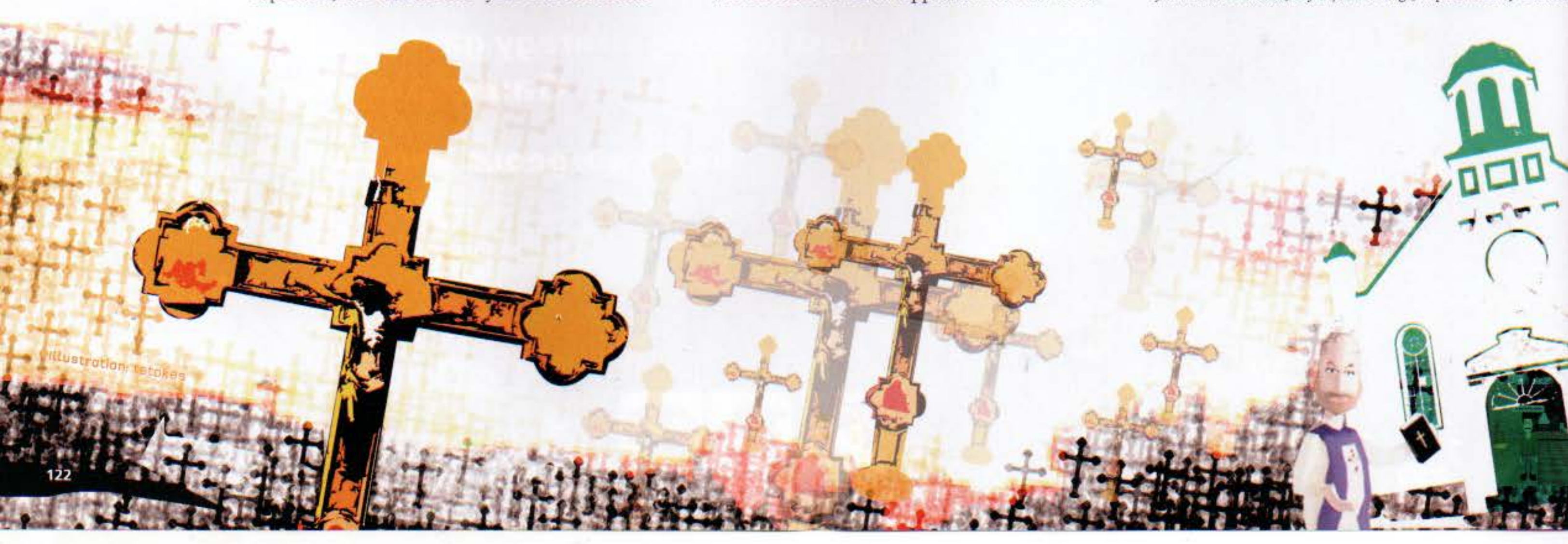


Illustration: tetokes


BY MR BIFFO

BIFFOVISION

Teraflops and trousers

Hello, girls! I am six feet and one inch tall. I weigh approximately 14-and-a-half stone. I have a 36-inch waist, and wear size 11 shoes. My contact lens prescription is -4.50 in my left eye, and -4.00 in the right.

What do the above statistics tell you? I mean, other than the fact I'm nearly blind and you probably wouldn't want me to sit on you? Do they tell you whether I'm a natural raconteur and wit? Do they reveal whether I have any sort of musical aptitude, or if I can kill a parakeet with my knees? Do they confirm my reputation as south-east England's loudest lover?

Answer: they tell you none of these things. Not one of those statistics tells you what I am like in person, any more than knowing that the PlayStation 3 has as its CPU a Cell processor running at 3.2GHz, with seven special-purpose 3.2GHz processors, capable of 218 gigaflops of performance, tells you a single jot about that. 360 has 512Mb GDDR3 RAM, and a CPU with three IBM PowerPC 3.2GHz cores, does it? Well thrust a branch up my buttocks and call me a lollipop; I'm literally cock-a-hoop with apathy.

PS2's Emotion Engine may have been empty hype, but it was a far better sell than knowing the PS3 has a system floating point performance of two teraflops, a fact which seems designed to appeal solely to games industry number junkies, and other very, very, very dull people. It seems a strange way to unveil a piece of hardware that – we're told – is being targeted beyond games players, and aimed squarely at the mass market. When was the last time you read performance statistics for a washing machine?

Sony's Emotion Engine, and the ludicrous assertion that Al Qaeda was using PS2s to remotely control nuclear-tipped robot suicide bombers, may have been little more than ghastly, vacuous lies, but as a hype tool they at least

> "There was nothing in the Xbox 360 and PS3 unveilings to suggest games are about to take any manner of quantum leap"

Nevertheless, Sony – staying true to the games industry's traditional, inexplicable obsession with numbers and statistics – has seen fit to roll out this woefully dull information, along with the equally non-thrilling revelation that the PS3 has an RSX GPU running at 550MHz with 1.8 teraflops of floating-point performance, 256Mb of GDDR VRAM at 700MHz and 256Mb XDR main RAM at 3.2GHz. Are you excited yet, kids? I don't know about you, but my trousers can barely contain my erection. I jest, of course: as usual, I'm not wearing any trousers.

Microsoft's Xbox 360 unveiling was every inch as un-mindblowing, with media word-funnels competing with each to see who could reprint the most impenetrable PR guff. So, the

tried to appeal to feelings rather than logic. Incredibly, since failing to deliver on its hype last time around, Sony is still waffling on about delivering new, emotional types of gameplay, now couching it in the kind of language that resembles the orgasmic exclamations of C-3PO: "Vram your floating point up my 3.2GHz core, R2 – before I go all tetrafloppy!"

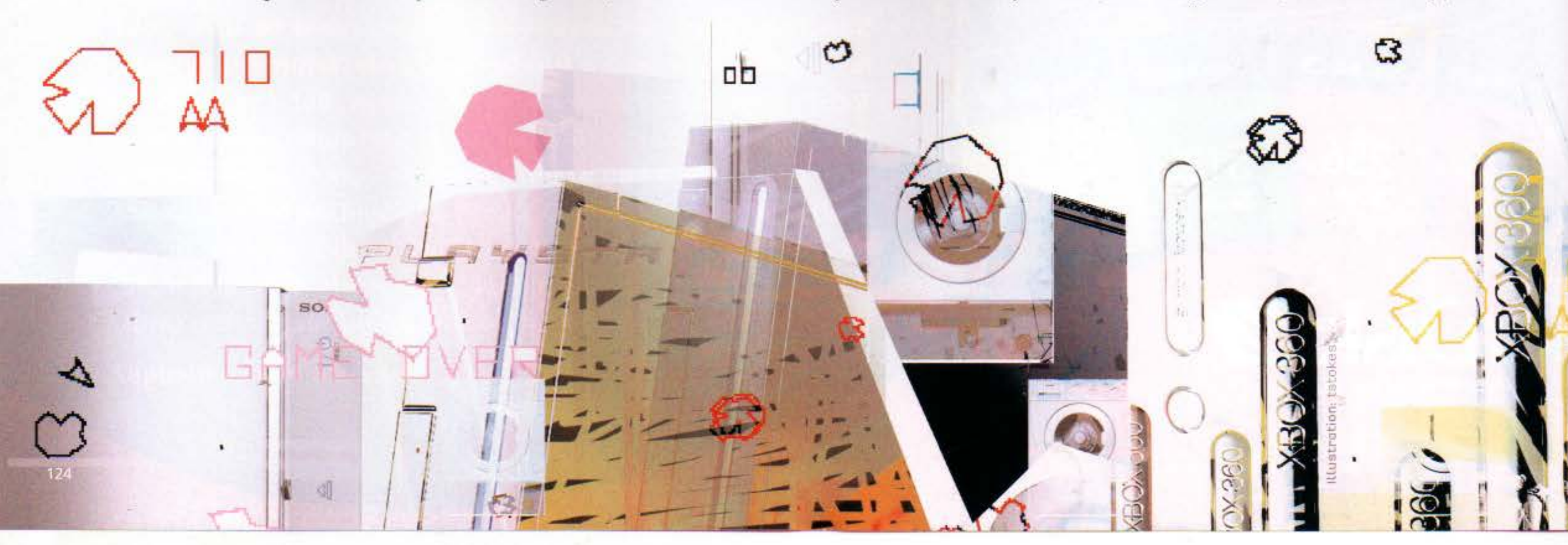
Trying to get emotion into games is a noble endeavour, but Sony has offered no evidence of how it intends to deliver that emotion on the PS3. I'm not even sure what they mean anyway – previous attempts to get inside the head of a game character have either come across as irrelevant distractions, or flat-out embarrassing. The PS2 era may have delivered many a sublime gaming experience, but nothing I would describe as any more emotional than clearing a level in *Asteroids*, or the feeling I get when buying a new pair of shoes. In fact, attempts to inject emotional content into a game usually works against it – distracting from the adrenaline rush of the action, or the ardent gratification of solving a particularly obtuse puzzle. Perhaps games are already emotional enough without needing to go that extra inch. Exhibit A, your honour: *Max Payne*.

Overall, there was nothing in the Xbox 360 and PS3 unveilings to suggest games are about to take any manner of quantum leap, other than the graphics being a bit better. We got the usual nonsense about the new machines being 'twice as fast' as their rivals (a claim I've always wondered about, given that to date none of the consoles I've owned have displayed any sign of being self-ambulant). Then of course we got the woefully over-used affirmation that the games would all resemble interactive movies. Who knows? Maybe this time they actually will.

Naturally, Nintendo is the only one of the big three to have kept statistics at bay, and talk about the game experience. Unfortunately, being the gaming equivalent of the Lib Dems, Nintendo could've announced that every Revolution is powered by the True Cross and still wouldn't have got headlines. Frankly, the only thing to thus far excite me is the advent of the wireless controller as a standard feature.

Of course, it's still early days. *Perfect Dark Zero* may well prove to be a tear-jerking epic, and *Killzone 2* might be stuffed with the sort of saccharine, punch-the-air, emotional manipulation that's usually the domain of Steven Spielberg. But if Sony and Microsoft can't get beyond dry, statistical abstracts and hollow promises, I'm not holding my breath.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television



Inbox



Issue 151

I have seen articles in Edge and on the web recently that discuss the positioning of advertising within games, eg Red Bull cans in *Judge Dredd*. The consensus is that it will be part of a new revenue stream for developers and/or publishers.

I just had a horrendous thought: extrapolating this phenomenon to its logical conclusion, might we expect to see fully fledged adverts in between levels or bookended around cut-scenes? Knowing the publishers they would probably make these unskippable. Adverts are already present prior to game trailer downloads, etc, but would 'proper' adverts in-game be a step too far? Am I right to be afraid?
Tej Pandher

The short answer is: yes. As the switch is made to continually connected, online consoles, it's possible and probable that the scope and scale of advertising will increase. Gamers will need to object strenuously if they want to keep games ad free.

After five days of sifting through coverage of E3 (hey, I have very little to do with my time other than waste it studying, or something) I felt I had to put finger to keyboard.

Every time another generation of hardware comes out, people like your fine selves have to deal with emails from disenfranchised gamers, depressed that the imminent hardware releases do little more than what the current generation does now, but louder and shinier. I'm not usually such a cynical guy, but even to me E3 was crushingly disappointing. Xbox 360 and PS3 were unveiled alongside videos of titles that... were pretty much identical in style to the discs spinning in our collective drives right now. The discussion seemed not to be focused on how awesome game X would be, but whether that *Killzone* trailer was real or not (worse still, it wasn't).

Granted, the *PGR3* teasers were pretty, and *MGS4* was a masterpiece in public relations (an unveiling that revealed next to nothing, but still had the fanboys typing away), but of all the titles shown off, of all those internet stories over five days, the only thing that really caught my eye was PSP *Lemmings*. *Lemmings*, for crying out loud! A port of a near 15-year-old Amiga game with a few more colours on screen, yet I watched the trailer, and read the previews, thinking all the while:

1. *Lemmings*, great! *Lemmings 2* would have been better, but still...

2. I hope they get the controls right – a system something like that of the SNES version would do fine.

3. What state is the games industry in? What have we come to when a 15-year-old game on the most sophisticated of handheld technology is one of the most interesting announcements at E3?

I can almost sense Sony telling people: 'OK, we've got this shiny hardware, but have nothing really new to put on it. Here, play *Lemmings*. You like *Lemmings*, don't you? Now sit there in the corner while we waffle on about teraflops and other useless statistics.'

Am I being overly sceptical? I mean, after all, we haven't really seen what's going to make Revolution revolutionary yet – there might still be something to offer. I certainly hope so.
Chris Charlton

What state is the games industry in when a 15-year-old game on the most sophisticated of handheld technology is one of the interesting announcements?

There's no shame in new games not being able to match the appeal of blueblood classics like *Lemmings* – only a handful of games made in any year truly stand the test of time. However, the videogame industry is going to have to find a way to make experimental projects viable, or there's little hope of innovation in the future.

I am a 32-year-old gamer who is completely neutral regarding brands and loyalty, preferring to buy into a quality game franchise as opposed to the actual machines, but I have got to air my opinion.

I can remember when the Dreamcast tried to compete with Sony's Emotion Engine in 1999. Sony mislead the public then too, with a demo in **Edge** from E3 1999 when they showed an awesome-looking old man's head that was incredibly detailed. The demo was called 'Charlie', and the promises that were made then are being repeated today. Here's how I came to this conclusion: I never did see the Charlie demo's quality in the PS2's entire existence. Sony claimed it was realtime back then, too! Are Sony misleading the gaming public?

Back then, I always knew the Dreamcast was the less-powerful machine (out-specced in every way compared to the, then, powerhouse PS2), but I believe the Dreamcast definitely had the edge in visual clarity – eg, the lack of jaggies – and despite being under-powered, somehow managed to look on par, or at least cleaner looking, than its PS2 counterpart.

I am definitely buying Xbox 360, but will wait for the realtime demos of what PS3 can do. If it's so damn powerful, why can't Sony just be honest to their loyal userbase? Frankly, I for one respect Microsoft's honesty and will continue to support them, not hyped-up disappointment. Emotional Engines, anyone?
Sean Fox

The irony is, of course, that the unfinished 360 trailers were perhaps as unrepresentative as the PS3 movies – just in the other direction. The simple fact is until you experience the final package – finished code on finished hardware via the finished controller – it's impossible to make a concrete call on what a console is capable of.

Is it me, or is every new generation of consoles met with exactly the same comments? I had a massive sense of déjà vu after E3 this year, so I checked it out by going back



through old issues of **Edge**. Sure enough nobody believed Sony over either the PSX or PS2. Also the cost of producing games would skyrocket meaning creativity would plummet and the world would end, etc, etc. Sound familiar? I wish developers would just stop whingeing. They complain that the current generation of consoles isn't powerful enough to allow them to fully realise the vision they have for the future of electronic entertainment. So what do they do when they get the required power? Apart from driving games and FPSes that is, they whinge about dinners like Hideo Kojima. What in the blazes is he on about? I wasn't even aware he made games any more, especially after *MGS3*!



Chris Niere finds the text-based story telling of games like *Planescape Torment* forces him to use his imagination, increasing his immersion more than cinematics might

I used to be one of those irritating Nintendo fanboys that claim only Nintendo offer original content and innovation! Ha! Don't make me laugh!

Am I getting old? Or just less tolerant of the drivel that the industry pumps out on a cyclical basis? Am I the only one fed up hearing about teraflops, floating point calculations and online gaming? Microsoft, wake up! The only people who have the time needed to dedicate to online gaming are either teenagers or the unemployed, and neither demographic is known for being wealthy with high levels of disposable income! The Xbox 360's biggest Achilles heel is the very thing Microsoft is pushing – hilarious. Who really cares if I can now see the little twerp in Texas I've just fragged on *Halo 3*? I don't. Online gaming isn't all it's cracked up to be, and I actually know more people who game online with their PS2s – weird or what? Besides, I'd rather humiliate my mates over some beers and some insults in the same room than the twerp in Texas.

Sony, bless 'em, aren't much better. When will they learn that we don't believe their prerelease hype? We don't believe it, do we? I have no doubt the PS3 will sell by the bucketload whatever the final specs and costings end up being, but I just wish they'd be honest and say 'this RSX chip doesn't exist yet'. That would be expecting too much, I guess, from a company that knows more about spin than New Labour. I am getting old, aren't I?

Even my beloved Nintendo have completely lost the plot. What the hell is the Revolution all about? It's wasted on me as I still have all my old consoles and games, much to my spouse's annoyance. Despite my rant about having heard enough about hardware specs, unless Nintendo had something more concrete to show they should have kept quiet. No bigger than three DVD cases? Good god, I'd better start saving my pennies to buy one then.

I used to be one of those irritating Nintendo fanboys – you know, the ones who claim only Nintendo offer original content and innovation! Ha! Don't make me laugh! How many *Metroid*, *F-Zero*, *Zelda* and *Mario* games do I own? They just regurgitate the same old guff every generation, and claim it's all new because of a crap cel-shaded look, a water cannon or a passenger in a kart! Innovation, don't make me laugh; they are the kings of sequels and unoriginality. I hate to admit I was wrong, but it is Sony who have innovated more with EyeToy, *Singstar* and the wonderful *Ico* yet this company is the one the hardcore berate the most.

I really don't understand the games community any more. It's becoming increasingly tribal, or maybe it always was and I was too blinkered to be able to see it. Now I'm starting to feel more like a hermit who resents having to come down from his cave in the hills to enjoy his hobby amongst these idiots of gaming. Praise be, therefore, to **Edge** – a bastion of sanity amongst the madness we live in. I just hope you continue to tell it like it is, unspun and ugly in all its glory.
Jody Barton

'...The processing power of these [next-gen] consoles should be regulated [because of the] realistic portrayal of violence.' [David Fowkes, letters, E151]
What the...? I have never seen a letter be so wrong in so many ways and in so little text. And in that list of idiots I count the girl who wrote in 'pointing out' that you missed the scores off the reviews that time.

Number one, has this guy been ever been to the cinema? The violence there was fairly photorealistic the last time I went. Does he also suggest that we blur the violent bits of films to make them more acceptable? Secondly, what is this guy doing letting his kids play such violent games in the first place? Does he let them watch violent films? How many letters and how much text have we seen in this very magazine discussing the age classification of games and the responsibilities of parents? Here's a textbook example, please turn his address over to Social Services.

I thought the Edge readership was intelligent?
Callum Hibbert

It's frustrating how often the game-violence debate boils down to the question of parents judging what's suitable for their children's consumption. So long as David Fowkes lets his children read Edge, we're happy.

Before raising the idea of investigating this issue, I realise that you mentioned in a previous issue the emerging aspects of 'alternate reality games' such as the BBC's *Jamie Kane*. I feel, however, that a more in-depth look at these games should be given by your writers in a forthcoming issue, especially with online games such as *Perplex City* (www.perplexcity.com) providing new and potentially revolutionary ways of looking at the ways in which we engage with games. Perhaps even a glance at websites such as the Alternate Reality Gaming Network (www.argn.com) would suggest that the emergence of these games is perhaps a move into the mainstream, and that these games provide a level of interactivity unseen in other conventional formats.
Martin Hollis

ARGs have long stretched the form and audience of videogames. Expect continued coverage in the future.

After E3 and the showing of the next generation, more and more developers are aiming for better graphics due to the 'higher level of immersion' it will bring. However, I personally find that no matter how realistic or detailed a game is graphically, it will never really immerse me as a player, as the world is given to you on a plate and there's nothing else to do but accept it. It is the designers' and artists' vision of the game, not something the player can interpret and adopt as their own.

I started playing *Planescape Torment* recently, and the heavily text-based narrative is quite daunting at first but, like a book, it forces you to use your imagination, and as a result I started to piece together my own detailed images. The way the game meticulously describes how each individual zombie

Continued



in the mortuary has been stitched up and branded is incredible, and I find my imagination more terrifying than any polygonal, normal-mapped, specular-highlighted zombie born in someone else's head. I think, in this case, a word paints a thousand pictures.

I don't know if this means that the games industry should take a step back and rethink the approach to making next-gen games and make them more abstract, or if I'm just trying to hold back the inevitable of a more cinematic gaming experience. After all, shouldn't the games industry stop trying to be more like the film industry, and try to be something more unique?
Chris Nieri

My younger brother was born with a relatively disabling growth problem on his left hand, but his favoured pastime is gaming and, to my amazement, he has absolutely no problem in operating any peripheral of any console.

This made me wonder: to what extremes do peripheral designers go in order to create such ergonomic devices, and do they consider their designs are going to be used by disabled individuals?

I would be overjoyed if you could write an article following the making of new devices, from conception to creation, so that the gaming public could witness the challenges and risks of designing equipment we all take for granted.
Robin Newton

Look out for a feature next month which will raise these points with a team working on a new gaming peripheral.

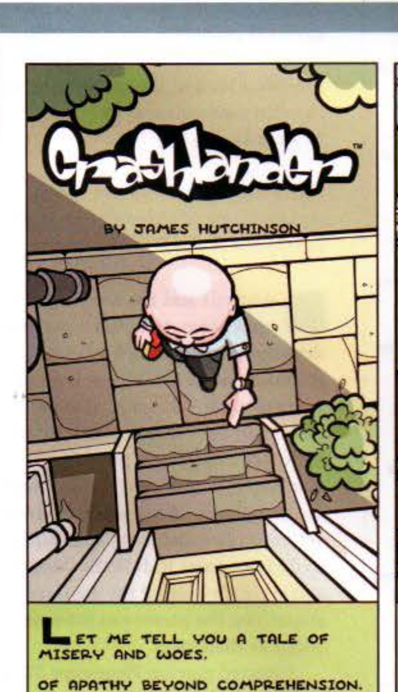
Considering Andrew Patten's suggestion [Inbox, **E**150] that game companies spend some of their marketing cash on sponsored game store makeovers, this makes a lot of sense initially. It's prevalent in other retail outlets – consider the huge, shopfront takeovers of places like Harrods by a single brand, and the pieces start to fall into place for game stores very quickly. It isn't difficult to imagine the front of your local outlet having a life-size *Metroid Prime Hunters* diorama in the window at launch time.

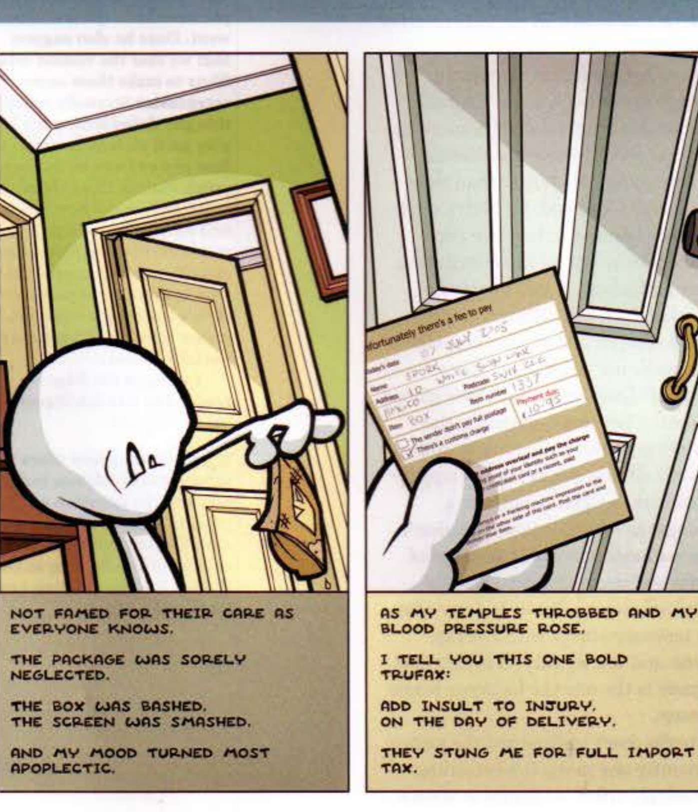
The question is, though, outlets like House Of Fraser and Debenhams et al are often multifloor shopping behemoths, attracting thousands of punters through their doors every single day – the same cannot be said of your local Gamestation, and that's not simply because 'it's a dingy computer shop'. The question may lie deeper than simple window dressing, and more along the lines that videogaming – arguably – still isn't quite ready to come out of the teenager's bedroom. Not for the majority of your Saturday morning windowlickers, at least.

This is somewhat in tune with Gary Penn's rant in **E**149 – that gaming isn't an immediately accessible, mature and uniformly enjoyable experience (yet). That's not to say I'm a lover of shoulder-barging my way through the annual mid-December bargain riots, but shopping for shopping's sake is something our culture constantly tells us we must do. Gaming isn't. Buying a game is not playing a game. Playing a game is not spread across the glossy front covers of Cosmopolitan month in, month out. Buying handbags, shoes, sports equipment, shaving products – ad nauseum – is.
Pete Fairhurst

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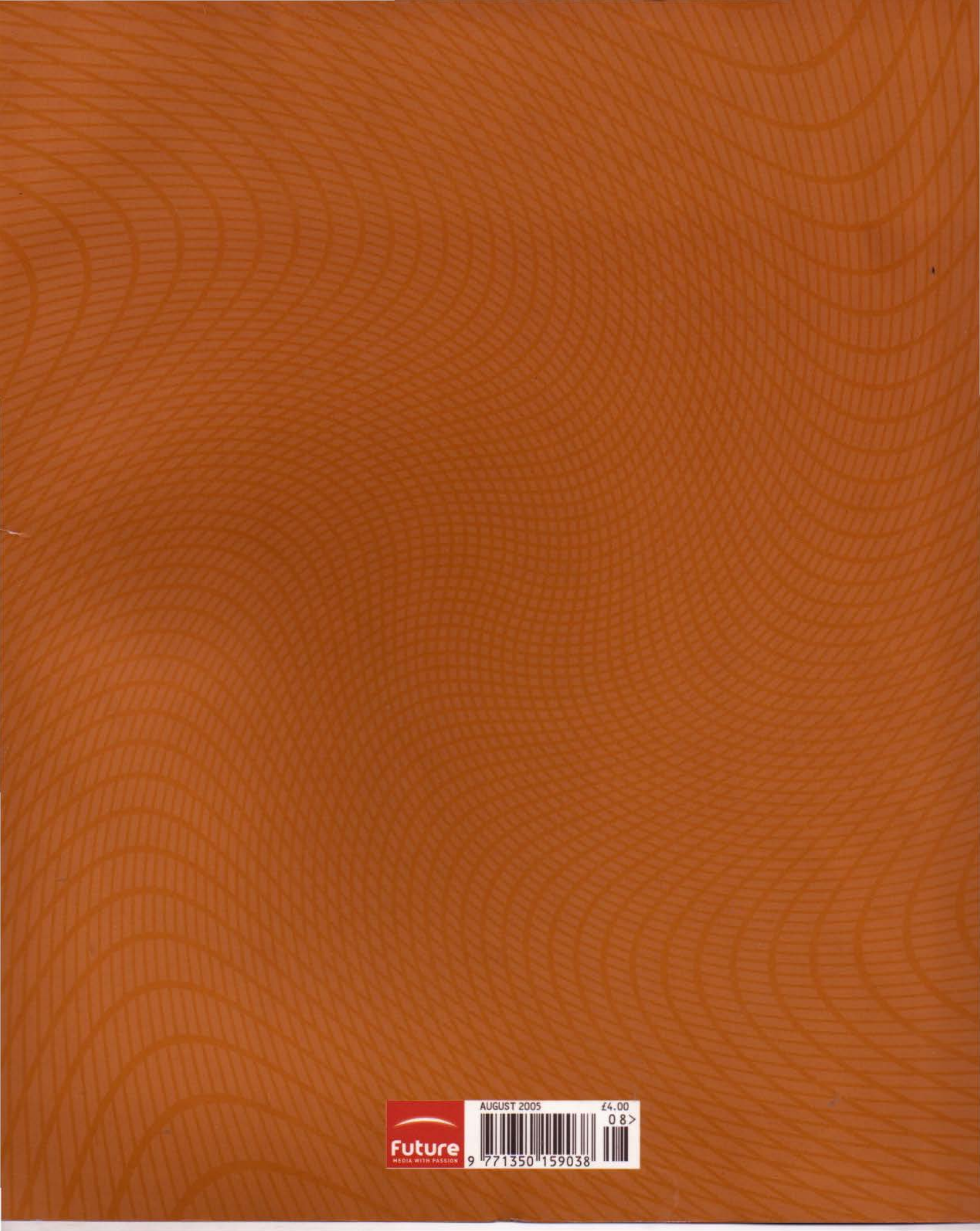
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